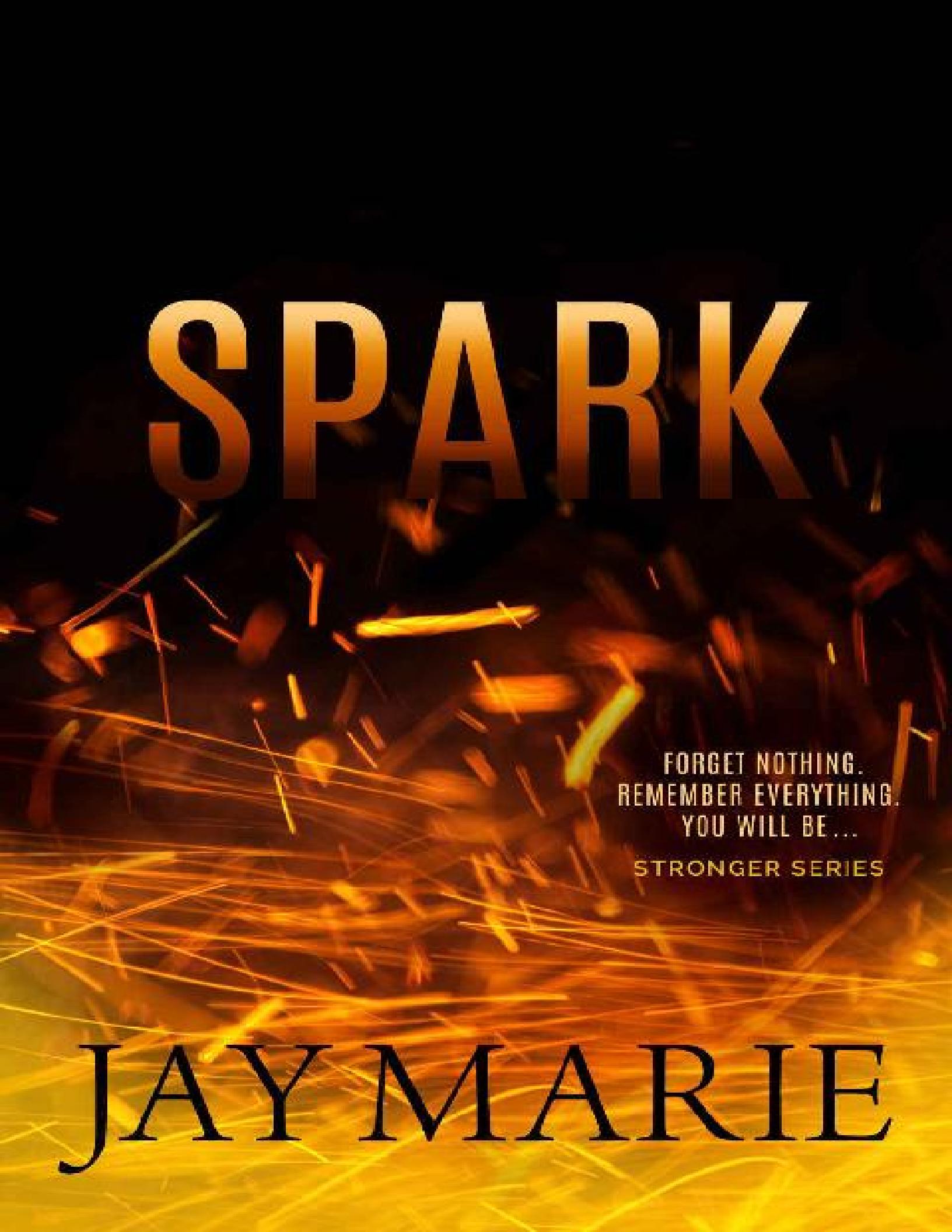


SPARK



FORGET NOTHING.
REMEMBER EVERYTHING.
YOU WILL BE...

STRONGER SERIES

JAYMARIE

SPARK

BOOK THREE - THE STRONGER SERIES

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JAY MARIE

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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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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.

This time, I would really like to thank my fans. You guys have been so patient with me this year and I really appreciate all the love and support. Writing a book while in law school while working a full-time job is not easy, but I did it! And I made it 10,000 words longer than the last book! So, thank you for sticking by me and making this experience my dream come true.

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1

BREAK

Sunshine peered in through the windows. Its warm glow lingered over my face, yet it did nothing to lift my mood like it used to. I had just woken up from another long nap that took up a good third of my day thanks to the heavy meds I was on; though, to be honest, I didn't want to be awake anyway. The past three weeks had been nothing but torment, and if there was anything that could relieve me of it, it was the deep abyss of my drug-induced slumber. At least, then, I was too numb to remember my nightmares.

Practically shackled to my hospital bed for the first week on this godforsaken island, I'd barely been allowed to move an inch without Darren's approval. Apparently, he wanted me to get as much rest as possible, so that meant the least amount of movement as possible. And in a way, I was almost grateful... because I had no desire to move even a single muscle. After one week of being bedridden, I had been forced to start moving around again. Apparently, it wasn't good to simply waste away in my hospital bed. Another lesson in learning my body's movements were not my own decision.

Every move was painful—even breathing hurt—but apparently, sleeping off my injuries wasn't in my recovery plan. My wrist, jaw, and ribs might be broken, but according to Darren and Sid, my legs worked just fine. I'd fought back winces and tears as I was forced to walk through the halls of the house, straining against the pain of breath, and showing none of it. I refused to let Darren see my pain. Just because he had broken my body didn't mean I had to act like it.

My wrist would remain in its cast for the next few weeks, and the wiring in my jaw proved to be the most uncomfortable and humiliating experience ever. I couldn't really speak. Only mumbles or inaudible sounds could escape my lips, so I eventually just gave up on my vocals altogether. Nurse Ginsby tried to teach me some simple sign language to help me communicate, but I was only interested in using the one containing a single middle finger.

Looking down at my bare left wrist, I found slight enjoyment in the lack of a particular silver cuff on my wrist. There was no need for them here. One was useless without the other, and I was on an island, for fuck's sake. Where the hell was I going to go? The others remained around my ankles, as did the collar around my neck. Even though I could bypass Darren's invisible electric fence, the collar itself had a greater purpose than just keeping me within my confines. It was the reminder that I did not belong to myself, that I was not of equal standing... because I still belonged to him, as if the tattoos on my wrists weren't enough of a reminder. At least I only had to endure the sight of one of them... for now.

I was now at the end of my third week of recovery, and the pain in my jaw was finally starting to fade, or maybe I was so doped on painkillers I didn't notice it anymore. Sid said it was healing well, and that I'd be able to have the wiring removed in a week or so. I couldn't wait to get the fucking thing off. Not being able to open my mouth or speak made things even harder than they already were. I could tell Darren was enjoying the silence, even though I didn't have shit to say to him anyway.

Thankfully, since my panic attack the last time I'd seen him, he stayed away most of the time. Sid felt it would help speed up my recovery if I was less stressed, and seeing Darren always pissed me off and stressed me out. Surprisingly, Darren had agreed, but he still managed to get his fill of me at night when I was asleep. Ginsby would tell me if he was on the island; he'd sit by my side for hours, watching over me as I slept my pain away. She thought it was sweet, but I knew it was anything but. Sometimes, I could still feel his presence the following morning—smell his cologne—and it often chilled me to the bone knowing he was there and I was helpless.

Apparently, Darren still had a lot going on back home from all the damage I managed to cause, plus his usual business. A single word hadn't been uttered about the status of my family, nor the outcome of my "funeral," and in a way, I was glad. If something had happened, I didn't

want to know. I wouldn't be able to change it, and it would only set my recovery back by weeks. I figured if Darren had done something, he would have told me to ensure my continued obedience...or to simply torture me. But still, the uncertainty about it made me nervous because eventually, I would find out, and I couldn't do shit about it. After all, Darren had said he was a man of his word.

I realized now that I could never really hurt Darren. Not physically, in the way I wanted. After what he did to me in that jail cell after escaping him, it was obvious to me he had been holding back so much; I was just too proud to see it. I was stupid if I thought I could withstand his physicality. It's not like it would ever be difficult for Darren to subdue a 120-pound girl, now technically 110.

I was so sure of myself. So sure I could handle him, but I was wrong, and now, I was paying for it.

For some reason, I didn't expect him to hurt me so badly, but thinking about it now, I realized the pain he inflicted on me wasn't what constituted my punishment; it was my recovery. It was taking away my skillset and replacing it with discernable vulnerability. My skills were useless now that my body was broken. And that was Darren's message to me: "You may have skills, but I can easily take them away." Fucking asshole. I'd be lucky if I could complete a butterfly kick by the end of the year.

My vulnerability was terrifying. I couldn't defend myself for shit, and it was the worst feeling in the world. If something happened, I was useless, and in a situation where you're constantly threatened, and your guard is always up, it really is the worst feeling in the world. I hated being left in such a weakened state, left to depend on others to take care of me. Every time I tried to do something on my own, Hank, my new shadow and bodyguard, would rush over and stop me. Everything I did required assistance, whether I needed it or not.

I sat in the cushioned reading nook of my medical suite and leaned against the large bay window. My tablet in my lap, I was listening to calming music and failing miserably at reading my book. Nurse Ginsby was preparing another bowl of chicken broth for me now that it was lunchtime. I had gotten so fed up with the smoothies, but it was all I could eat until my mouth was unwired. I had lost nearly ten pounds from my new liquid diet, losing my muscle tone along with it since I wasn't exactly working out anymore. I felt like I was withering away, both physically and mentally.

At least I had Ginsby to keep me company, though she wasn't much for conversation, but then again, neither was I. I had Hank, but he never spoke much, not unless he was telling me what to do. He never let me out of his sight. Whenever I had to leave my suite, he escorted me, which wasn't often since I had no desire to ever leave my room anyway. Upon Darren's approval, I could roam the house, but I had zero interest in going anywhere or doing anything. I preferred to just sleep.

Darren informed me that when I fully recovered, I would have two guards since he didn't trust me with just one. There was a compliment in there somewhere, but in the end, it just made me feel more hopeless. I had strived so hard for freedom, yet I set myself back further than when I had first started. I couldn't allow myself to get upset about it, though. I knew the risks as well as the consequences, and now, I had to live with them. It didn't make the situation suck any less, though.

Broken, defeated, and restrained, I didn't know what hope I had to escape Darren a second time. I knew I would have to kill him first, but just the simple thought of that was exhausting, especially since there was a prerequisite to complete first — namely, his empire. I wasn't giving up, though. I promised myself that and I promised Jason. I owed it to my family and to everyone else who had ever been wronged by Darren's organization. But it didn't mean I couldn't wallow in a little self-hatred for a while. I'd earned it, after all. I was just so tired of being stronger than I felt. It was exhausting. I needed a break... and I suppose I was getting it... literally.

"Here's your soup," Ginsby said with a smile, breaking me from my train of thought. She handed me the thermos, and I took it from her, placing it in my lap and returning to my book. "Oh, I should inform you," she began a little nervously, "Mr. Davis would like for you to join him for dinner tonight."

My stomach immediately dropped, as did my appetite. I gave her an incredulous look before turning to my tablet. I pulled out the stylus and began to write on the notepad app.

'Why,' I wrote.

She shrugged. "He just does, dear. He's been gone for over a week now and would like to see you."

Best week of my life.

I cleared my notepad and wrote 'great' on it and flashed it to her.

“We’ll need to get you ready in a couple of hours. He’ll be arriving on the island around six p.m.”

Fucking. Fabulous.



I spent the next several hours sitting in a shower chair while Ginsby helped to wash me. It was difficult to wash my body and hair with a busted wrist and ribs. For the longest time, I tried on my own, but it took me forever, and the struggle just wasn’t worth it anymore. At first, I didn’t like the idea of Ginsby washing me and seeing me naked, but eventually, I stopped giving a fuck. She wasn’t much for beauty help, but she could flat iron my hair like it was her own. My hair was ridiculously long now, past my breasts and annoying as hell. I always managed to get it caught in something or lay on it wrong. For the most part, I kept it back in a ponytail and out of my way, but I knew Darren liked it down and fanned out.

When I was presentable, Hank escorted me to the dining room where I sat and waited for Darren to arrive. The moment I sat down, my long smooth hair fell into my face, and I just couldn’t take it anymore. It was so long and annoying that I didn’t care if Darren preferred it down. I took the hair tie from my left wrist and pulled my hair into a loose low ponytail. My hair was never this long, ever. I didn’t have the time to manage it, and it just got in the way. I planned to ask for a real haircut soon, but I doubted Darren would grant it. He liked my hair long and still wanted it longer.

As Darren’s doll, I had been dressed in a light yellow strapless sundress and glittery nude flip-flops for shoes. While my hair was straight and smooth, my face no longer had to bear the annoyance of makeup. Over the past few weeks, I hadn’t worn any during my recovery, and Darren seemed to appreciate my natural beauty now, rather than mask it with something fake. Although, he expected to go the extra mile for special occasions apparently.

I never knew what the fuck he was thinking. Like he’d decide to suddenly wine and dine me, and I would finally settle down with my life and accept him. Sometimes, I honestly considered just giving in and forgetting about my vendetta. It would be a hell of a lot easier and definitely less exhausting. Maybe my rebellious soul would finally die and rest

peacefully in Darren's pocket, leaving me to crumple into the complacent robot he so desperately wanted.

Normally, I was fairly vocal with my emotions, but since the wiring of my jaw, I had to learn to swallow them whole. There were so many times when I had almost choked on my own anxiety while I slowly drowned in my depression. I felt useless in my broken state, and totally helpless in my recovery. But I had to remind myself over and over again... this was only temporary. My body would eventually heal. Darren was not invincible, and I would inevitably kill him, no matter how long it took me.

Somewhere in the house, a door shut, and I listened to the thunderous steps that followed. My heart rate spiked, knowing it was Darren and that he was on his way toward me. Anxiety flooded my system, and I couldn't help but place my elbows on the table to rest my head in my hands. Knots tore away in my stomach while my head throbbed with a knowing pain at my temples. I could see Hank from the corner of my eye, watching me intently as I sat in silence and focused on my breathing rather than the impending torture of Darren's presence.

And then suddenly the footsteps stopped, and I felt a giant looming shadow behind me. I shuddered when I felt his warm breath against my skin.

I sucked in air as Darren's large warm hands came to rest on my bare shoulders. Heat bloomed under my skin where he touched me, and even though I hated him with every fiber of my being, I almost wanted more of it. I just wanted to feel good. I wanted to feel loved and cherished... and when he touched me like that, it felt real.

Darren dipped low and placed a gentle kiss on my neck. I closed my eyes as his lips on my skin forced my blood into an all-out marathon.

"Hello, princess," he drawled smoothly into my ear. My body immediately stiffened.

Fuck, that voice of his.

The knots in my stomach tightened from the mere sound of his voice. The deep baritone that could terrify and entrance all at the same time, and it made me shiver. His hands moved to gently pull my hair out of the ponytail and casually drape it over my right shoulder, and I couldn't help but flinch from his touch.

His breath tickled my neck, leaving behind a tingling sensation that I fought with all my might to ignore. Despite what this man had done to me,

he was still able to leave me breathless with just the touch of his hand. I hated him for it, but I still craved it. The tip of his nose traced up the side of my neck, quietly inhaling me while his hands continued to burn into my shoulders.

“How I have missed you,” he breathed into my ear.

My body was on the verge of trembling, not only from anticipation but also from fear. It may remember the pleasure, but it also remembered the pain. It knew he was the reason for my wired jaw, my useless wrist, and the sharp ache of each breath I took. But apparently, none of that could compare to how good he could make me feel, and it had been some time since he’d made my body erupt in total volcanic bliss.

Eventually, Darren stepped away from me, and my body shivered from his sudden lack of body heat. He pulled his chair out, unbuttoned his light gray suit jacket, and took his seat at the head of the table. He wore a white dress shirt underneath with a silver tie, matching his gray slacks as per usual. It was rare to see him out of a suit. Even on the island, he still conducted business via webcams or meetings on the nearest land outside of the island. At least, that was what Ginsby had been telling me.

I could feel Darren’s eyes on me, but I just stared straight ahead out the window that gave me a perfect view of the white sandy beach outside.

Thankfully, the island staff brought out our dinner, interrupting the silence before Darren could. A tall bowl containing beef broth and teeny-tiny vegetables and noodles was placed in front of me with a large straw. It was still all I could manage until my jaw was unwired. I was beyond sick of this liquid diet. I longed for something solid in my stomach; so much so, that I wouldn’t put it past myself to beg Darren for a fucking steak when I could finally open my mouth again. Darren started on his plate while I sucked small amounts of soup from my straw.

“I spoke to Sid today about the progression of your recovery,” Darren said as he bit into the fresh island fish he’d been served.

I merely glanced at him to acknowledge I heard him. I knew he didn’t like to be ignored.

“He said you’re healing just fine, but he worries about your mentality.”

I looked back at Darren confused. My mentality? The fuck was that supposed to mean?

“Hmm?” was all I could manage. I had been reduced to muffled sounds in order to communicate now unless I wrote it down my tablet.

“You’ve been diagnosed with depression, Jaden. I’m concerned.”

I snorted. I couldn’t help it. It never ceased to amaze me that he would never understand why I felt the way I felt. Of course, I was depressed—this wasn’t news—but he would never guess why even if I spelled it out for him in capital fucking letters.

“Do you find this funny, Jaden? Do you think your recovery is nothing but a joke to me?” he replied sternly.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise, but then again, how could I be? He was the frickin’ cause for my recovery in the first place. Darren apparently didn’t see the irony and continued to glare at me until I backed down. I finally sat back in my seat and took another sip from my straw. I didn’t have the energy to argue with him, nor did I have the verbal capacity.

“Tomorrow, the wiring in your jaw is being removed. If Sid doesn’t see a change in your attitude by the end of next week, I’m putting you on an antidepressant.”

My gaze immediately shot to him, my eyes lit up in shock. He would drug me with fake happiness? Fucking seriously? I gave him my pleading puppy dog look and shook my head. He glared back at me with a warning in his eyes to let me know how serious he was. I had to do something to prevent this.

I quickly turned to my tablet and pulled out the stylus, writing intently with my stupid left hand since my right was still in a cast, and flashed the pad to Darren so he could read it.

‘Compromise?’ I wrote.

He barely even glanced at the tablet before the word no quickly left his mouth as he took a sip of his red wine.

I looked at him incredulously before rolling my eyes and setting the tablet down. Of course, it was a no. Darren slammed his fist down on the table in response, causing me to flinch in my chair.

“Goddammit, Jaden, this is not a game anymore!” he bellowed at me. “There are no more compromises. You will do what you’re told, and that’s final.”

I looked at him with so much pain in my eyes I could practically feel them burning. No longer able to stand the sight of him, I shot out of my chair, ignoring the intense pain that raged through my ribs as I turned to leave the room. Hank immediately halted my attempt as he moved right in front of me, blocking my exit to the hallway. He then gently, but firmly,

gripped my upper arm and escorted me back to my seat. Darren remained perfectly calm and seated as he nonchalantly took another bite of his fish while Hank forced me to sit back down. I crossed my arms and huffed an irritated breath through my nose as I stared straight ahead.

“Finish your dinner, Jaden,” Darren ordered without looking at me. I didn’t move. Just stared out the window with hate in my eyes.

“I swear to God, little girl, you do not want to push me today,” he warned, staring at me intently, that dangerous glare back in his eyes.

Fear gripped my heart again as I felt my body shudder from the look he was giving me. Honestly, what more would he do to me? He couldn’t hurt me physically since he was so “concerned” about my recovery. If he took away any more privileges, I would definitely succumb to my depression, which would further slow my recovery. All this I had against him, yet I was too afraid of him to use any it. I no longer felt the need to test him because he would always exceed my expectations. Always.

Swallowing back my fear, I tried to keep my hand from trembling as I reached for my bowl and took a small sip from my straw, hoping to placate him. He seemed happy enough as he returned his attention to his dinner. We were silent for the rest of the evening. I managed to finish almost all of my water and most of my soup and took my evening medicine without complaint.

When we were finished, Darren gently took my hand and carefully pulled me from my chair to him. His other hand rubbed my arm up and down, softly caressing my skin as he looked me over. I kept my eyes down. I couldn’t bear to look at him anymore.

Darren tugged me along to the parlor where a fire was flickering away in the white marble fireplace. Still holding my hand, he laid down on the couch and carefully pulled me down to lay on top of him.

Even with broken ribs, I had to admit for as solid as he was, Darren was quite comfortable to lay on. My cheek pressed against his chest while he continued to clutch my hand near his heart, his other hand gently soothing me by rubbing my back and playing with my hair. I stared off into the fire, listening to Darren’s heavy pounding heartbeat.

What I would give to hear it stop...

Eventually, his hands began to travel into my hair, and I found myself lulled into a trance of warmth and comfort. Darren might be a raging hurricane, but his softer side almost made him tolerable. I craved this part

of him; the part that made me feel special and cherished... even though I didn't want to be.

Darren's lips brushed against my forehead as he kissed me sweetly, rubbing my arm up and down until he finally exhaled a long heavy breath.

"You're going to go for a walk on the beach tomorrow," he suddenly said. I tensed slightly, confused at his words. "I think the sunshine will do you some good. You're looking paler than usual," he finished.

I nudged him slightly, letting him know I heard him. I didn't have much interest in venturing outside my room or the island itself. I'd rather sleep my pain away than deal with it. But maybe he was right. Maybe some sunshine would do me some good. My skin was looking pretty pasty, after all.

Eventually, I felt my eyelids grow heavy. I knew it was still early, but my meds often made me drowsy, especially after I had eaten something. I closed my eyes and released a heavy sigh as I allowed myself to slip into sweet unconsciousness.

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2

SOOTHE



Absolute calm. That was all I ever felt when I held Jaden like this. When she'd fall asleep in my arms, and all I had to focus on, at that moment, was her—her breathing—her heartbeat—her warmth. Absolute peace. I didn't realize how much I needed it in my dark life until I almost lost her. When she escaped from me, I hadn't known how deeply she had sunk her claws into my wretched heart; that was until she ripped them out and left me to bleed with rage in her absence.

I knew I would get her back. The GPS on her collar saw to that, but I had learned my lesson in underestimating her, and I had a feeling she had learned hers as well. I doubted she would make the same mistake twice, but it didn't matter much since she would never be given an opportunity like that ever again.

Jaden would have round-the-clock supervision, and as soon as we returned home, she would have four bodyguards to watch her when I wasn't there—two for the day and two for at night—twelve-hour shifts, no breaks. Until she had accepted her life, that would be the case. I already had two perfect soldiers lined up for the job. They were among my best men, and I felt I could trust them with Jaden's safety as well as her tricks. They were sharp enough to recognize her deceptions and smart enough to remain professional at all times unless they wanted to be fed their dicks for breakfast.

Things were slowly getting back to normal back home. The damage to my house was repaired, and after some more serious damage control and blackmailing, the news tape of Jaden speeding off on my bike was now a pile of ash. The guards who had allowed her to escape had been dealt with, and new security measures were being put into place at the estate to ensure what had ensued would never happen again.

Jaden would not get away from me a second time. I was committed to her conditioning now more than ever as I realized how strict I needed to be with her. Her fragile state would make it easier. She wouldn't fight me while she was still broken if she wanted to recover sooner, but then again, neither would I. Jaden just couldn't know that. I was still worried about her recovery, and I didn't want anything to interfere with that, but she still needed to accept her place.

I knew Jaden was depressed even before Sid told me. I had anticipated it. Jaden was beyond vulnerable with her broken body, and she hated it. She hated that I had rendered her defenseless and useless, but she needed to understand that her skillset was a privilege under my roof, and I could easily take it away if I wanted to. I'd made her broken body her own prison, and I could see it was destroying her inside. Vulnerability was terrifying, especially for someone like her, and I hoped the fear of that alone would be enough to keep her in line. But still, her depression did worry me. I'm not so cruel as to wish constant misery on her. I wanted her happy with me while at the same time fearful of the consequences for opposing that.

Regrettably, I knew her depression was a step in the right direction. It was a sign that she was coming to the conclusion she wouldn't win against me, that there was no escape, and that she was better off accepting her life with me. It would still take her some time to come around, but once she recovered, I could start to show her how enjoyable life with me could be.

I looked down at Jaden, sleeping soundly on my chest, and it warmed me like the sun. She was so small yet so ferocious. How was it possible that someone could be so adorable yet so diabolical at the same time? She had honestly impressed me with her successful escape plan, but it didn't piss me off any less. I wanted her safe. Always. And if she was able to escape, my enemies would smell weakness and come running.

If I couldn't demonstrate my ability to control my own future wife, then how could I be trusted to control my own empire? Every decision was judged like a goddamn reality show; everyone was watching, and no one

could ever afford to look weak. Otherwise, they were quickly chewed up and spit out, allowing the vultures to circle the remains until nothing was left.

And I was the shark who enjoyed eating the vultures.

Jaden stirred, and it brought my thoughts crashing back to her. My hand gently caressed the side of her face, just admiring the softness of her skin. I had to admit I was excited about the removal of the wiring in her jaw. I knew it was my own fault, but I didn't want the headache of her screaming and arguing with me or anyone else for that matter while I cleaned up the giant shit storm she'd created.

For the first few weeks, I had just wanted her silent and submissive. For the most part, she had been, but I knew it wouldn't last. Once she was able to speak again, she would start expressing her complaints and objections in an array of cuss words that would only make me want to reinstall the wire. I'd have to find a way to instill her fear of me without fucking up her recovery. The only problem was I wasn't around enough to continue to remind her of who owned her. I already had to fly back out tomorrow morning to deal with more shit, but I somehow managed to have one day this week that allowed me the time to come and visit her. It was overwhelming how much I missed her.

Just feeling her silky red hair between my fingers was enough to remind me of how much I needed her. And it pissed me right the fuck off. In her presence, I'd become obsessive, but in her absence, I'd become pathetically dependent. She was always on my mind. Always. I felt like a goddamn drug addict just waiting for my next fix.

In a very short span of time, Jaden had become the lifeline to the other side of my world where others didn't often venture. A side that was warm, and bright, and safe, and Jaden was the fucking bouncer. I couldn't get in without her. She was my gateway drug that led straight to paradise, the place where I could forget everything and just drown myself in her. The only problem was I treated her like a damn dog treats its chew toys. I just had to remind myself not to chew too hard lest I ruined her completely.

Jaden was still so much an experiment—my perfect little puzzle. I was still figuring out what worked and what didn't with her. If all else failed and she still refused to break, I had one last card in my pocket to draw. My final ace—one I hoped I wouldn't need because the damage of that could be

irreparable. It was a dangerous and fragile method, and I feared that if I used it, neither one of us were coming back from it. Ever.

There was a price for everything and mine just might be Jaden's sanity...

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3

HORIZON



The following day, I finally got the wire off my jaw, and it was the first time in weeks I was actually happy about something. After completing several exercises for Sid, it was determined that my jaw had completely healed, though I had to take it easy and keep up with the exercises to make it strong again.

I still couldn't talk much or eat hard solids, but at least, I could finally move my jaw again. It was sore and stiff while my voice was dry and dull, but Sid assured me that, in time, it would all go back to normal so long as I stuck to my recovery plan and followed the exercises.

That day, I had scrambled eggs for breakfast, and it was the best damn breakfast I'd ever had, especially since Darren had to leave the island early for some mainland business.

Darren was much busier while on the island. Since he couldn't attend his meetings face to face anymore, he had to resort to new ways of delegation. It seemed that Scott handled a lot of it too since he wasn't around as he normally was. I didn't mind it so much, as it meant more time away from Darren.

Once I finished my breakfast, Ginsby told me that Darren had assigned another guard for my trips outside. Benito, a tall, lanky-looking SOB with dark hair, stood next to Hank; they both wore the exact same black suit, white shirt, and black tie. They even wore the same black sunglasses. Geez, had Darren contracted the Men in Black to guard me? I thought it was

strange, especially since the guards on Darren's estate all wore black combat gear. Maybe the threat out here wasn't as great as the ones back at the estate.

After being woken from my nap and reluctantly changing into a knee-length flowy dark pink halter dress and light brown leather flip-flops, I headed over to the door to signal I was ready to leave for my mandated walk. I wondered if I would get a treat afterward.

Hank and Benito both stood from the fine black leather lounge chairs added to my suite to accommodate them and walked over toward the door to unlock it. Yes, I was actually locked in this room unless I was granted access to leave. Another fine reason to be depressed.

Hank unlocked the door and stepped out. I followed him while Benito trailed behind me, walking through the house until we finally came to the front door. The house was actually quite spacious for an island home. Many windows to let in natural light and mostly creams and shades of blue and turquoise decorated the interior. Thankfully, my suite was on the first floor, so I didn't have to walk the stairs.

When we reached the front door, Hank opened it and allowed me to walk past him into the warm sunshine. It was very warm on the island, but the breeze was always something to be thankful for. Apparently, a hurricane had hit land several miles away, and the winds from it were felt all the way here.

Humidity sank into my skin as I wandered down the stone walkway until I finally hit the sand. It was perfectly white, and the water couldn't be a more beautiful shade of clear blue. But all the beauty in my sight couldn't slake the overwhelming disinterest I felt. What good was a beautiful private island if you couldn't even fully enjoy it?

I slipped out of my flip-flops and left them in the sand before taking a few steps toward the shore. The moment my toes touched the water a, "That's far enough, Miss Jaden," left Hank's lips. I didn't even acknowledge him. I squished my toes into the wet sand, feeling the warm bath-like water wash over my feet. And still, I felt nothing.

I casually strolled along the shore, Benito and Hank not more than twenty feet behind me. I did my best to let the scenery drown them out, but it was tough to ignore two stalking shadows behind you. At least, the water felt nice against my feet and ankles.

As I walked, I pondered the necessity of this walk. One foot in front of the other. What difference did it make? I had walked five hundred feet from the front door and didn't feel any better. But to be fair, I didn't feel any worse either. In a stubborn fit, I stopped walking and plopped my ass down, my knees bent and my feet digging in the soft, warm sand.

"Miss Jaden," Hank said, "our orders were to take you for a walk on the beach, not to sulk in the sand."

Take me for a walk? The fuck was I, a dog?

Irritated, I leaned over, took my two fingers, and started writing in the sand.

'Drag me then,' I wrote and went back to staring out at the ocean.

They weren't going to make me walk anywhere. I'd fight them, and they'd just end up injuring me. Walk over.

Hank sighed heavily as he and Benito walked over to a nearby palm tree to lean against it. I didn't bother to turn around. I knew where their eyes were and where they would remain. Mine, on the other hand, stared out at the roaring ocean before me. The wind was warm but fierce as it forced the water to rise and crash into the shore. The scene was beautiful and full of promise, but my heart just wasn't in it. Even as the midday sun shined down on me, its rays warming my skin, I was reminded of a moment that would never last. Whatever second of peace I would receive would instantly shatter the moment I brought myself back to reality. This was not home. This was not life. This was not me.

And technically, it wasn't even me anymore, was it? Over the last few weeks, I had come to terms with the fact that I was now legally dead. Jaden Morgan Wilder was gone and buried six feet under, yet her killer was still at large.

Now that I was dead, I wondered if it gave me an advantage. I doubted it, though. If it gave anyone an advantage, it was Darren. He could take me out in public, and no one would bat an eye. I wasn't the missing girl anymore. I was the found dead girl in an alley, burned to a crisp after an apparent drug overdose. The search was called off, and the world would eventually forget about me. At least, if that were the case, I wouldn't have to worry about any more gardeners recognizing me and getting themselves killed.

I sat there in the sand for what felt like hours, watching the waves roll and crash against the shore, while the wind blew through my hair. I felt

numb inside. Like those waves, everything was crashing around me, and I was helpless to stop it. I felt useless, hopeless... and utterly fucked. Sid was probably right. I wasn't helping my condition by wallowing about my life, but I was running short on the positivity bank.

What the fuck did I have to be happy about? I had no family now, no friends, no one to talk to, no one to laugh with or cry with, no one to see me as something more than just a pretty possession to keep. I was alive, I suppose, but was I really even living? Not legally, that's for sure.

Was this it? Was this the end? Was this the epitome of my life now? I hadn't even contemplated my original vendetta of revenge against Darren. I still wanted it, but I was too emotionally exhausted to put any thought or emotion into it. Vengeance would have to hold on the back burner for a while until my body fully healed. Not much I could do until then, and that didn't make matters any better. The longer my recovery, the longer I would inevitably be stuck with Darren.

After what felt like hours of just staring into the horizon, I finally caught on to Hank's voice.

"Miss Jaden, it's time to go back inside. It's time for your dinner," Hank said.

Not hungry.

"Miss Jaden," Hank called again when I didn't move.

Rolling my eyes, I nodded and slowly started to make my way to standing. My lips formed into a tight line as I fought the ache in my side from the strain of my movements, but it didn't last long as my shadows hurried over to help me up. Once I had the sand brushed from my legs and ass, they escorted me back to the house, Benito picking up my shoes along the way.

As we walked back to the house, I finally got a chance to actually admire it. It turned out to be a beautiful Spanish villa. With lots of high windows, orange tiled roof, cream-colored brick, and rounded arches, it was a gorgeous compliment to the island... but I didn't give a damn about it. It was just another prison. More pretty bars to cage me.

When we finally made it to the door, I realized being outside didn't really make me feel any better. I was still just as bloodthirsty as before. At least, I probably got some freckles... but then I remembered Darren liked my freckles. Damn them.

Luckily for me, Darren was still stuck in some meeting off the island, so I'd be having dinner by myself. I had it in my suite; Benito stood watch while Hank called Darren to give his report of my day. I barely ate the soup that Ginsby had set down for me before she retired for the night.

"You'd better finish eating that," ordered Benito from the end of the room. I turned to him with a scowl. Motherfucker hadn't said anything to me all day, and now, he was telling me what to do? Who the fuck did he think he was? I'd eaten maybe a quarter of it but didn't care to finish now. Instead, I narrowed in on him and then slowly and deliberately pushed my bowl off the table like a thug life cat. The plastic didn't break since I wasn't allowed glass, but the soup spilled all over the floor.

"What the fuck!" Benito yelled as he marched over from his chair. He looked down at the mess and then to me as I remained seated in my chair, not a single fuck given. "Clean this shit up!"

I shook my head at him. Fuck him.

I didn't know why I was looking for a fight, but knowing Darren wasn't on the island at the moment was making me brave... and just plain stupid. But for some reason, I wanted to annoy my guards. Maybe I needed the attention or the distraction from my own misery by causing someone else's. Maybe that would be enough to lift my mood.

I just didn't fucking care about anything.

Benito groaned at me as he went to fetch the staff to clean up my mess, closing and locking the door behind him, but then Hank appeared right after him. He held his cell phone to his ear as he approached me.

"Yeah, she's right here," he said and then held out the phone to me. "Mr. Davis is on the line. Say hi."

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the phone out of his hands and held it to my ear, saying absolutely nothing while enjoying the confusion on Hank's face when he looked down to see my spilled soup all over the floor.

"Jaden?" came Darren's voice on the other end.

"Mmmhmm," I mumbled in acknowledgment. He was silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"How's the jaw?"

Oh, fuck him.

"Fine," I answered. The first word I'd verbally spoken to him in over a month.

I heard Darren suck in a slow breath as he listened to the one little word I gave him to recall my voice. I knew he would want more but as per usual, fuck him.

“Good. I’ll be gone for the next four days, so you need to listen carefully to your guards and medical staff while I’m away. I need you to get better, Jaden.”

I snorted again. “‘Kay.” I almost laughed.

Here he was talking to me as if I was some kind of child who needed a reminder to behave while he was gone. Condescending cock stain.

“I’ll see you in four days. Behave.” And then he hung up. I felt my hand clench the phone until my knuckles turned white.

“Miss Jaden,” Hank said, holding out his hand for the phone.

I glared at him, held it out, and then deliberately dropped it on the floor, just inches from his hand and right into my spilled soup. It crashed against the tile, completely shattering the screen and splattering the stupid smartphone with vegetable soup.

Ha-ha.

“Goddammit, girl! What the fuck did you do that for?!” Hank shouted as he bent down to pick up the phone.

“Oops.”

Hank groaned, scowling at me like he wanted to hit me, but there was no way Darren would have that. He was the only one allowed to break his toy. I just stared Hank down passively, until he finally turned around and exited the suite. I was alone for maybe fifteen seconds before Benito returned with a maid to clean up my spilled soup from the floor.

I had to admit I was being childish now, but fuck it; if Darren wanted to treat me like a child, then I would behave like one.

Let the fun begin...

4

PLAY

For the next two days, I did everything I could to piss off Hank and Benito. It was actually pretty entertaining to see their faces heat up with nowhere for the rage to go. They couldn't take it out on me. The most they could do was lock me in my suite, which was where I wanted to be anyway. I considered it a double win.

The cast on my wrist was finally removed, and it felt so good to have the damn itchy thing off. I had physical therapy exercises to complete for that as well, but it was worth it to make my wrist stronger. That was the only thing I complied with since it really did benefit me, but everything else, I flat-out fucking refused.

I refused just about anything I could. *I didn't want to wear that dress or that color. I didn't want to watch that movie or listen to that song. I didn't want to leave my suite. I didn't want to go outside. I needed water. Never mind, I didn't need it anymore. The soup is too hot. Now, it's too cold. I didn't break it. It must have fallen on its own. Can you not breathe so loudly? No, you shut the fuck up.* I mean, literally anything.

I was officially six years old again, and I found it funny as fuck. I'd never mouthed off so much in my life. I'd catch myself laughing out loud at their hilarious misery, especially since there wasn't shit they could do about it.

“Piss me off one more time, little girl, and I swear I'll have Darren on the phone so fas—”

I laughed. “So you can tell him what? How incompetent you are at handling me? Good luck with that conversation.”

Benito went so red in the face, I thought he was going to explode like a giant tomato. Too bad Hank was too busy taking a piss break to see it. And still I just laughed and walked away; but this time, Benito actually crossed a line.

In a fit of uncontrolled rage, he grabbed my still healing wrist in a way too tight grip as I turned my back on him. I yelled out loud in pain like a wounded animal, attempting to pull away from him, but when he didn't let go, and the pain only worsened, I did the only thing I could do.

"Let go!" I shouted and swiftly brought my leg up, and roundhouse kicked him right in the side of the head as hard as I could.

The moment my foot collided with his skull, he immediately released me and nearly fell to the floor, while I clutched my ribs like I had just been punched in the side.

Fuck. Okay, no more kicking for a while.

When Hank returned to see me hunched over against the wall and Benito counting the stars circling his head, he went nuts.

"WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?!" he shouted at us.

I chuckled, even though it only caused more pain to my ribs. "Benito just learned what happens when you fuck with the wrong girl," I replied with a smirk.

Hank quickly turned to Benito in rage-filled confusion. "What the fuck did you do?" he yelled at him. By now, the nearby staff was starting to poke their heads around the corner to witness the commotion.

"Nothing. Little brat started mouthing off again and tried to walk away."

"Yeah, and then you yanked my healing broken wrist, you fucking idiot," I retorted, holding my wrist up. I could see bruises forming where his fingers had wrapped around my pale skin. Fabulous.

"Let me see," Hank said, rushing over to me.

I held my wrist out for his examination but kept my eyes on his face. He knew this was bad. A guard touching me was bad enough, but bruising something that was already damaged and healing was even worse. He knew they were in trouble, but I wasn't stupid enough to think I was home free. I was nothing but an instigator anyway.

"Come on," Hank said, taking me gently by the arm and leading me back to my suite. "Let's have Sid take a look."

Once Sid had confirmed nothing had broken further, I was locked away in my room for the rest of the night, which was fine. I wanted to be alone. But no one could ever leave me alone long enough.

Sid walked in by himself some time later and casually sat across from me in the reading nook. He crossed his ankle over his knee and folded his hands on top, staring at me with a disappointed look on his face.

“Yes?” I said, raising my eyebrows and looking at him expectedly.

He sighed deeply and relaxed his shoulders. “What are you doing, Jaden?” he asked me gently.

I furrowed my brows. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“No, asshole, I don’t.”

Sid sighed again and rolled his eyes, like that would make this conversation any easier for him.

“You’ve been acting like some spoiled child ever since Darren left the island. Don’t think I haven’t been monitoring your behavior. I’ve been watching very closely,” he said.

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “What do you care?”

“I care because, believe it or not, I do want you to get better, Jaden.”

I scoffed at him. “Sure, you do.” I snickered, folding my arms across my chest and leaning back.

“And I’m not the only one who cares, Jaden. Darren cares very much for yo—”

“Fuck. Him,” I said sharply, cutting him off. I couldn’t give a fuck less about whether he thought Darren cared about me. The only thing Darren cared about was controlling me.

Sid rubbed his face in frustration. “I know you’re angry, and I know you’re depressed, but is this any way to handle it?”

“And how do you suggest I handle it, doc? The same way Darren suggests? He’ll die first,” I spat.

Sid cleared his throat before squaring his shoulders as if he was ready to give me some bullshit heart-to-heart speech.

“There is no changing your situation—”

“Wrong,” I dejected.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t still thrive in it.”

I straight up glared at him. Thrive? Was he serious?

“I’m not allowed to thrive. In fact, I’m not even allowed to be having this conversation with you. Does Darren even know you’re here?”

“No, this conversation is just between you and me.”

“It won’t stay that way for long,” I replied. Darren always found out about everything.

“Something I’m sure he’ll understand if it doesn’t.”

I snorted. “Yeah, okay,” I said, turning my head to look out the window.

“Jaden, this is no way for you to live your life, and toying with your guards is just a childish way of distracting yourself from the real problem. You need to focus and get better. You need to get healthy again. Stronger again. We can help you.”

“No one can help me,” I muttered, my eyes lingering on the water that danced in the dark, almost reminding me of a certain pair of eyes I loathed.

“You’re not alone in this, Jaden. You have help—”

“Sid,” I said cutting him off sharply. “I am more alone now than I ever was before. Please don’t insult me by telling me otherwise because I won’t believe you.”

“Jaden, come on—”

“Just go,” I clipped, turning my head back to the window to hide the tear that slipped through.

Sid sighed heavily as he stood; his gaze heated as he stood over me, but I was done with this conversation.

“You’re better than this, Jaden,” he said forcefully. “You can choose to be a victim, or you can choose to be something else entirely. Stop being a little bitch about it and stand up.”

I turned to him, almost ready to kick him right in the dick. “Get out,” I spat.

Sid groaned, threw his hands up in the air, and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Fuck him. Fuck all of them.

5

WORTHLESS

My wrists burned in agony. Chains rattled above me. Dirt and sweat covered my body.

Where was I?

“Look at me, slave.”

My heart stopped in its tracks. Slave...

My eyes snapped to find him, and then I immediately regretted it.

“There is no escaping this, and there is no escaping me. I am four times your size and over twice your weight. My strength and speed will always exceed yours. Always. Whatever hope you have left of beating me in this little game is false as well as foolish. In what world do you ever imagine escaping me and your future?”

“FUCK!” I screamed as I jolted from my hospital bed.

My heart was pounding out of my chest, my face was sweaty, and my breath was coming in and out of my lungs like I might die if I didn’t take my next breath that very second. I was back in my hospital bed; the last thing I remembered was passing out on my reading nook, so I didn’t know how I got there. Hank probably.

Snagging the hair tie from my wrist, I bunched my hair back into a messy knot just to get it out of my face and ignored the ache in my wrist. When my hair was secure, I pulled my knees to my chest, rested my temple against my knee, and looked out the window. The sun was rising, and the birds were already awake. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on their songs, hoping to calm the storm raging inside me. I stayed like that until Ginsby finally entered my room unannounced.

"Oh, good, you're up," she said, surprised. "I brought your breakfast."

"Not hungry," I said without moving from my position.

"Jaden, please!" she shrieked, and I immediately snapped my head toward her in shock and concern, scowling in her direction. She quickly backtracked. "I'm sorry," she said in a huff, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You've just become so difficult these last two days."

For some reason, that was enough to make me feel bad. So I released a deep breath and traded my bed for the table, sat down, and attempted to eat my breakfast. Ginsby smiled and sat down to make sure I ate enough for Darren's approval. I silently picked at my egg white omelet and sipped on my orange juice until I was full, which consisted of only three-quarters of it, but whatever. Valiant effort and all.

After breakfast, I took a shower and changed into a flowing teal blue sundress, allowing my hair to air dry. I practiced my jaw and wrist exercises under Ginsby's instructions, took my medications without complaint, and was rewarded with a trip to the pool. Escorted by Hank and Benito, who were still pissed off from yesterday, I lounged in the shade with my tablet and tried to read for a while, but my thoughts kept lingering back to my conversation with Sid.

"You can choose to be a victim, or you can choose to be something else entirely."

The question was, what was that something else? What did it make me if I chose not to be a victim? I didn't know. Was there even another choice of status? I was the stolen, and as of a few weeks ago, officially the forgotten. I was gone, but I was still here... barely a survivor, but a survivor nonetheless. Yeah, I was wallowing in my self-pity; so much so, I probably deserved an Oscar for it. I was only depressed because my body was useless. End of. Once my strength returned, so would the rest of my fire-breathing antics. For some reason, it was just hard to find the mental motivation.

After a while, my lunch was brought out and placed on the table next to me. A bowl of hot creamy potato soup and a smoothie awaited me, but I wasn't interested in the soup. It was too hot outside for that, so I sipped on the smoothie instead.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Benito was still fuming as he watched me ignore my soup. He had a nice little red mark that led from the corner of his eye to his temple, courtesy of my foot. He'll probably have to

explain that to Darren later when he returns. That should be a fun conversation.

By the time I finished my smoothie, my soup had gone cold, and I had even less interest in eating it. When the staff came around to collect my lunch, the same maid who had cleaned up my mess from my spilled soup the other day looked down at the still full bowl, disappointed.

“You no like your soup?” she asked me politely, her accent conflicting with her English.

“I’m not that hungry. Thank you,” I replied with a small smile.

“Jaden, eat your goddamn soup,” Benito nearly yelled at me from across the way. I turned and glared at him something fierce.

“Why don’t you come over here and make me, Benito,” I challenged.

Benito took a rushed step forward, but Hank immediately stopped him before his back foot could even move by placing a quick hand on his arm. Benito stopped in his singular track and stepped back into place, taking a deep breath to calm down.

Choke on it, Benito.

Evading the tension, the young maid quickly collected my dishes and left without another word. I then decided it was probably time for some exercise. Since there was no chance of accidentally bumping into Darren anywhere, I decided to wander the house and do some exploring. None of it interested me, to begin with, but it was something to do.

Most of the house was either hardwood or tile, lots of open space and windows, with orange and cream-colored walls dominating nearly every room. I eventually stumbled upon the home gym and became instantly envious. It was significantly smaller than the one at Darren’s home, but it still had all the same equipment.

There was another home theater, still smaller, several random bedrooms and bathrooms, a parlor with a wet bar and pool table, and a finished basement of no important significance. The house was beautifully furnished, decorated in a Spanish setting with cultural references and adornments everywhere. For a moment, I almost thought I was standing in some Mexican drug lord’s home. Close enough, I guess.

The rest of my day was dull and mundane. I played a game of pool alone in the parlor, practiced my jaw and wrist exercises several times, and took my medication, which eventually made me sleepy. I took a small nap in my reading nook for a few hours until it was once again dinnertime.

Begrudgingly and absent an appetite, I was escorted back to the dining room, where my dinner was waiting. This time it was a thick, creamy zucchini soup. I pushed my spoon around in it for a while, taking one bite and immediately regretting it. Fucking gross. I noticed Benito's face flare up at my refusal, but he said nothing. Hank stood next to him, slowly shaking his head in disapproval, until he left the room to take a call. That was when Benito made his move.

He stormed over to me, slammed his fist down on the table only a few inches away from my bowl, and stood over me, fuming.

"You'd better eat your goddamn dinner this time, you little brat. I'm done dealing with your stupid rebellious bullshit," Benito seethed.

I shook my head with a laugh.

"Get the fuck out of my face, Benito, before I make your left match your right."

"Ya know, you're never going to amount to anything," he retorted with a snarl.

The fuck did he just say to me? I looked up at him, enraged and shocked he had even dared to share that kind of shit with me.

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me, you little shit. Keep rebelling all you want, but it's never going to get you anywhere. You're nothing but a tiny girl with a bad attitude and a tight hole to fuck."

I immediately saw red.

"You don't know shit about this *tiny* girl, Benito. Keep pissing me off, and I swear I will burn your ass for good. All I have to do is flash you, and I get the pleasure of watching Darren kill you. Is that what you want?"

Benito chuckled, and I almost punched him right in his stupid face.

"Try it, Jaden. We'll see who comes out of that one alive. Even if I'm dead, at least I died my own man and not someone else's worthless whore," he spat and then returned to his position against the wall just in time for Hank to return.

My fists curled so tight my palms burned and my knuckles turned white till my hands shook with rage. I wanted to flip the table. I wanted to rip the walls down with my bare hands and shatter every window with the wrath blistering in my vocal cords.

Worthless whore.

Well, fine then. I would show Benito exactly what this whore was worth.

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6

LUDACRIS

I didn't know how I did it, but I managed to finish half my bowl of soup, even with a stomach full of rage and violence. I was then taken back to my suite, where I watched movies for a while, waiting for my opportunity. I sipped on some tea at my table, Hank and Benito quietly chatting at their designated chairs, until Hank was called away again.

After a few minutes, I caught Benito watching me. On a whim, I took my teacup and gently pushed it right off the edge of the table and watched it shatter and spill all over the floor.

“Goddammit, Jaden! Come on!”

I shrugged. “Whoops,” I said and got up to head to the bathroom, which was only a few feet away from the door to the hallway.

“Ugh! Do not move! I'll be right back,” he shouted and then walked out of the door. But as soon as he was out of sight, I quickly snatched the door handle before the door could shut and lock me in. Bingo.

I slowly pulled it open and peeked out. Benito was long gone, and now so was I. I snuck around the corner quickly, managing to avoid all eyes until I found my way back to the parlor, shut the doors, and locked myself in.

Oh, Benito. You fucked with the wrong bitch.

Smiling to myself, I walked over to the wet bar, grabbed a bottle of Jack and a shot glass and sat on the floor behind the bar where I could hide and finally enjoy some well-deserved whiskey.

Let the fun begin.



With Jaden now secured back in her suite, I summoned Hank to my office for the meeting I had called him about earlier. I was able to return to the island a half a day early thanks to some serious micromanaging and three dead drug dealers. Turf wars were always messy, but give them an inch and an entire city is taken... or attempted, I should say.

Sid was sitting in the black leather chair across from my desk, waiting with an anxious look in his eye. I was currently flipping through Jaden's medical file, looking over her latest updates and considering her current medical status.

I was pleased to discover that Jaden's jaw and wrist were healing nicely, along with her ribs. I hadn't planned extensive damage when I broke them; just enough to remind her of what I could do and who she was fucking with. She should be fully restored in the next month, assuming she followed her recovery plan.

Hearing her voice over the phone felt like a weight lifted off my shoulders, even if it was clipped and angry. I missed my name on her tongue and the way her voice shook when she was afraid. I planned to hear it again very soon. You never really realize how much you miss something until it's gone. Of course, I only missed her sailor's vocabulary or her argumentative mouth a little bit, but that was something that would diminish in time. The only thing I ever wanted to hear was her moaning my name in brutal ecstasy.

Much to my irritation, Jaden had, in fact, been diagnosed with depression, which wasn't much of a fucking surprise. All she ever did was sleep and mope around like it was the end of the goddamn world. But it wasn't the end of the world; it was the beginning of a brand new one, one I was very much looking forward to.

But I had been watching her while I was away. She had been much more difficult with her guards and staff than I had anticipated now that she could voice her frustrations. I had been so enraged, I wanted to turn around and fly right home to deal with her, but I had to handle my own shit first. And that shit was now officially handled.

When Hank finally gained access to my office, he quickly took the empty seat next to Sid and sat down, unbuttoning his suit jacket and tugging on his uniform black tie.

"Mr. Davis," he said with a nod.

“So,” I said, closing Jaden’s medical file. “How productive has she been?”

Hank cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable.

“Not very, sir,” Hank said with disappointment. “She’s been far more difficult than usual. Lashing out, causing fights, and raising all kinds of hell. I don’t know what to do with her anymore. She just won’t listen.”

I looked over at Sid, knowing I wore a disapproving scowl across my face as I glared at him, waiting for an explanation. He was the brains behind her recovery.

He shrugged, looking down at his knees before finally answering. “This is normal. People with depression experience different symptoms all the time, and some of them are irritable, angry, and argumentative. This will pass.”

“I’m aware of the symptoms of depression, Sid. What I’m unaware of is how to fix it in Jaden’s case.”

“Can’t we just put the chick on some more meds or something?” interrupted Hank.

I instantly scowled at him, rage burning my eyes.

“That *chick* is my future wife and mother of my goddamn future children. Show some fucking respect, Hank,” I seethed.

Hank bowed his head in submission. “My apologies, Mr. Davis,” he said quickly backtracking.

“It’s not that easy,” Sid started with a deep sigh. “It’s not like Jaden has a chemical imbalance that can be fixed with a few prescriptions. She’s just upset over her current situation because she feels powerless. We just need to find a way to motivate her again. Give her something to look forward to besides sleeping and irritating her staff.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Hank chimed in, and I couldn’t help but glare at him.

“Sleep is her way of coping. She prefers it to her reality because she doesn’t have to deal with the pain of it,” explained Sid. “And when she is awake, irritating you and Benito is her way of distracting herself from her own pain. Her only form of real entertainment. We’ve got to give her a better reason to want to wake up in the morning.”

“The only motivation she currently has is to fantasize about killing me,” I said bluntly.

I knew Jaden still hated me and wanted me dead. I didn't exactly blame her, considering what I had done to her, but eventually, I would change her mind. I just wanted something else entirely to motivate her to get out of bed.

Hank and Sid exchanged looks in response to my admission, but they shrugged in a way of agreement. They could see it in Jaden's eyes whenever she was plotting something. Nothing ever came of it, but I knew when her eyes glazed over and her jaw clenched, she was plotting. My little open book.

"Well, we just need to change her mind," Sid said positively.

I chuckled. He acted like it was going to be easy, but Jaden would always have a place in her heart that burned with hellfire for me no matter how good I was to her. But it didn't matter. This tiny disruption would not deter my plans.

As soon as Jaden fully healed, she'd kick up her own ashes and give blaze to the buried embers still glowing beneath. This was just a minor setback for her, only temporary, or as temporary as I would allow it. I had to create a way for that spark to ignite those flames again, and it would start with her mental health first.

"So what do we do?" I asked with irritation.

"Well, I can tell, she is very lonely. We cou—"

"What the hell do you mean she's lonely?" I cut in. "She's surrounded by people twenty-four-seven."

"But no one who's allowed to converse with her casually," Sid responded cautiously. He did have a point. I didn't allow casual conversation with Jaden because not only did I not trust her, but I didn't trust my staff with her either.

"What about the damn nurse?" I ask Sid.

"Ginsby? No way. She'd bore Jaden to death."

I groaned in frustration. This was not how I planned this conversation to go.

"So what do you suggest? I find her a temporary island BFF?"

Hank scoffed with amusement but quickly retracted his response when I glared at him from across my desk.

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. Jaden could use a personal trainer to get her going again. Maybe we could find one who's friendly enough to get Jaden back into shape. Maybe someone around her own age?"

I looked away from Sid, considering the idea. Maybe finding her a temporary friend was a good idea. Jaden wouldn't like it, and she'd refuse it all, but then again, it wasn't really her choice anymore. Maybe this "friend" could give her something else to focus on, like herself. She'd have to have the right personality, someone who could really encourage her to get better. She'd also have to have skin thicker and tougher than a crocodile. Or possibly just someone almost annoying enough to motivate Jaden to get rid of her, and to do that, she'd have to push herself to get better.

"All right, fine," I finally agreed. "Start looking for a personal trainer. Let me know when you have it down to a final three, and I'll make my decision. I'll discuss it with Jaden after we choose a trainer. And I want good credentials, Sid, the absolute best. Until then, not a word of this to anyone," I said, eyeing Sid and Hank.

"You got it, boss," Hank said with a nod.

"I'll get started right away," Sid said, getting up and heading for the door.

"Oh, and Sid," I added as he stopped at the doorway. "Find someone... annoyingly happy."

He smirked. "I'll have your candidates by the end of the week."

I nodded while both left my office without another word. I worried about bringing another person onto the island to be with Jaden, but it couldn't cause any more harm than I'd already done. Maybe this person could give Jaden something else to focus on besides her misery and determination to try to kill me. I rolled my eyes at the thought. She needed to get over herself and stop denying the truth. You'd think she would have learned by now she wouldn't win against me. Ever.

Thinking about all the times she'd fought me before had me itching to have a go at her again. It'd been so long since I'd last had her squirming and moaning beneath me. Just the thought had me reaching to adjust the hardening length in my pants. I didn't trust myself with her, though. Not in her fragile state. If I had my way with her now, I'd set her back weeks of recovery, and I couldn't afford to wait any longer than I already had to. I already wanted her too much as it was, and it only got harder every day. Literally.

The sounds of banging and yelling from the hallway cut my thoughts short. The sounds were faint, but I could hear someone calling out Jaden's name in anger.

Fuck, what had she done now...

I left my office and followed the source of the chaos to the parlor, finding Hank banging on the door, and Benito screaming Jaden's name, along with some very unsettling threats that made me see red.

I stormed over to Hank and Benito, who upon observing me, immediately ceased their failed forced entry.

"What the fuck happened now?" I growled. I could hear loud rap music coming from the other side of the doors.

"The stupid bitch locked herself in the parlor!" shouted Benito.

Without thinking, my fist instantly collided with his jaw, knocking him right to the floor. Wrapping my hand around his throat, I swiftly hauled him up to standing and slammed his head into the hanging glass picture behind him, hoping the glass would dig into his skull.

"And how the fuck did my *stupid bitch* manage to do that?" I asked, my voice laced with venom as I stared him down.

"She... snuck out," he tried to say when I came to realize I was squeezing too hard.

"Obviously," I said, dropping his useless weight to the floor. Marching my way toward the locked door, I lifted my knee and kicked the handles of the double doors in, splintering the wood and knocking one of the doors completely off its hinges.

I stormed inside, my eyes immediately scanning for Jaden and any possible threats, even though I knew there were none. Ludacris boomed through the stereo system overhead, drowning out the chance of hearing any other sounds in the room, but that was okay. My hearing wasn't totally necessary for the interesting sight before me.

"Move, bitch! Get out the way! Get out the way, bitch! Get out the way!" came Jaden's voice as she rapped along with the lyrics, a bottle of Jack Daniel's in her hand as she stood on top of the pool table in the corner of the room. Her back was to me as she danced to the song in her silky white pajamas, rotating those hips of hers and stretching her arms above her head. She was clearly too drunk to even notice the doors had been kicked in or too drunk to care.

The song then remixed to "Get Back," and Jaden nearly lost her shit as her feet instantly switched to a fighting stance and her fists came out to fall in line with the rhythm of the bass. She rapped the lyrics like it was another

language, and if I hadn't been so pissed, I might have actually laughed at how cute and entertaining I found it.

It was then that she finally turned around and noticed me standing right behind her, my arms folded across my chest as my glare finally caught her face. Yet she didn't react. No thanks to the alcohol. Instead, she pointed at me, a big goofy smile on her face as she rapped, "I ain't playing around. Make one false move, I'll take ya down. Get back, motherfucker! You don't know me like that! Get back, motherfucker! You don't know me like that!"

Had this not been so dangerous, I probably would have pulled up a chair and watched the show, maybe even tossed a few hundreds in the air, but the fact was Jaden was still recovering, was on medication, and was at risk of falling and further injuring herself. I had to call the curtain.

I quickly marched over to the pool table, swept my arm under Jaden's knees, and caught her upper body gently, easily removing her from the table and setting her down on her feet before me. It might have been the first time I picked her up without a single hint of protest from her.

Jaden swayed from side to side as the bottle still hung from her left hand. I snatched it out of her hand, setting it on the pool table behind her. Nearly half of it was gone.

Fucking Benito...

I glared down at Jaden, my hands on her shoulders to hold her steady, but all she did was giggle at me. I grabbed the remote to the stereo, which happened to be sitting on the edge of the pool table, and turned off the system.

"Hey!" she whined. "I likethatsong."

I shook my head at her. She was already slurring.

"What have you done?" I asked darkly, my hands now moving to her face, tilting it up so I could examine her eyes. Bloodshot.

She smiled and chuckled. "I got into the liquor cabinet," she slurred with another giggle.

"I can see that," I replied angrily, looking over her face. Flushed.

And then she turned, bent over, and threw up all over the rug under the pool table.

Fuck...

I quickly stood behind her, held her hair out of her face, and rested my arm under her pelvis to keep her supported without putting too much pressure on her ribs or stomach. She threw up for several minutes,

eventually dry heaving since her stomach had now completely emptied all over my rug. When the nausea had passed, she slumped in my arm while her other arm rested on the pool table to support herself. After easing her down onto one of the nearby chairs, I placed a trash bin in front of her and stormed out of the room.

“Is she okay?” Hank asked as I bypassed him.

“Get her cleaned up,” I ordered and went straight for Benito’s throat, hauling him back up against the wall. He barely even fought me.

“HOW THE FUCK did you let this happen?” I roared at him, slamming him back into the already broken picture frame.

“I-I don’t know. I left the room for one second—”

“You left her alone?!” I shouted at him as he cringed in fear. I shook with fury.

Rule number one was that Jaden was to remain within sight at all times. No exceptions.

“No, she manipulated me. I didn’t mean—”

“You were warned about her tricks, Benito. You were supposed to be watching her... and you failed.”

“I-I, I didn’t... I wasn’t—”

“It’s okay, Benito. Don’t worry.” I got in real close to his ear. “At least you’ll get to die your own man and not someone else’s worthless whore.”

Benito immediately ceased his struggle as he caught on to my words. And then I snapped his neck.

Benito’s lifeless body fell to the floor in a heap, and I stood over him in complete satisfaction. I had listened to his little conversation with my worthless whore earlier today, not to mention the bruises he’d put on her already damaged wrist. He was lucky we were on the island and not back at the estate. Otherwise, I would have taught all of my guards a lesson in respect. I would not tolerate others disrespecting Jaden, especially to my face. I would always defend her honor. To disrespect her was a direct insult to me, and I would not fucking have it. Blood would spill first.

After calming my racing heart, I dragged Benito’s body from the hallway and out of Jaden’s sight. Even though she should probably get used to the sight of death around me, I didn’t want to give her stomach another reason to jump ship. I then pulled out my phone and arranged for two new guards to arrive in the morning. One to relieve Hank and watch Jaden at

night and the other to replace Benito. Hopefully, the next two wouldn't turn out to be disappointments.

I then dialed Sid, who answered on the first ring.

"Yes?" he said from the other line.

"Two days, Sid. I want someone in two days. No excuses."

"Yes, sir," he replied, and I ended the call.

Once Hank and Ginsby had Jaden successfully back in her suite, cleaned up and passed out in bed, I went back to check on her a final time for the night. It was now well after midnight, and Jaden should have been in bed hours ago. But as I watched her sleeping form, all moments of rage ceased to exist.

Jaden's gorgeous red hair fanned out over her pillow, and I found myself wanting to wrap my fingers around it. I wanted to hold her small frame against my own and feel the heat coming off her body as she melted into me. And I wanted to hear her voice my name, even if it was only a whisper. As gently as possible, I carefully ran the tip of my finger down her cheek, slowly tracing along her jawline before running my knuckle back up to her temple. Her skin was so soft, so warm, and too damn tempting.

"Don't worry, Mr. Davis. Ginsby said she's going to be just fine," said Hank, interrupting my serenity.

"Hank," I said, my eyes still lingering over Jaden.

"Yes, sir?"

"Have someone clean up Benito."

I swear I could hear the man gulp.

"Yes, sir," he said softly then moved to the corner of the room to quietly make a phone call.

I went back to focusing on my serenity for the next several hours.

7

HANGOVER

I woke up the following morning with a splitting headache. The sun beamed right in my eyes, forcing me to turn on my side with a groan and pull the sheet up to cover my entire head from the light. But then the sound of the blender flooded my ears with a loud grinding noise and my irritation became too much to resist.

“Hey, turn that shit off!” I shouted at Ginsby, yanking the sheet off my face to yell at her. But as she ignored me, my eyes traveled to an angry looking Darren sitting at my table, watching me with that disapproving look. The blender then stopped. “Oh, forget this. I’m going back to bed,” I whined then pulled the sheet back over my head and curled into myself.

I could hear Darren’s furious footsteps as he marched over to me and ripped the sheet from my body. “Get up,” he commanded, but I just curled tighter into myself, groaning with agitation. “Get up, Jaden!” he roared over me, and I flinched instinctively before slowly unraveling myself, my eyes trained only on him, afraid he might move me himself. When I was finally sitting upright, he visibly relaxed, but his eyes were still as cold as ever. “We need to have a little talk, you and me.”

I sighed, pulling my knees up to rest my elbows on my thighs and rub my face awake. “I’m too hungover for this. What do you want to talk about?”

“Sobering you up. Go take a shower and meet me on the patio for lunch in thirty minutes.”

Lunch?

“Wait, what time is it?” I asked, groggy.

“Twelve thirty. Now, get up,” he ordered.

“Yes, Heir Hitler,” I said with a salute.

Darren ignored my humor and walked out of the room, his phone immediately seeking his ear. Shit, had I really slept that late? It certainly felt like it.

“Good morning, dear,” Ginsby said with a smile, walking over to me hopefully with my hangover cure. “Or should I say good afternoon? Here, drink this. It’ll take away that nasty hangover.”

“Thanks,” I said and accepted the cup.

“You know you shouldn’t be drinking with the amount of medication you’re on, sweetheart. It could cause serious complications to your health. Don’t you want to get better?”

I sighed heavily as I took a sip of what she gave me. Fuck, it was delicious.

“I know, Ginsby. I had a momentary lack of self-control. I doubt it will happen again.”

I was sure Darren would see to that.

“I certainly hope so,” she said nervously. “We only want what’s best for your health, dear.”

“I know,” I said with a nod and focused on finishing my hangover cure.

Once I had showered and changed into a black cotton sundress, Hank and some other guard I had never seen before escorted me. This one was blond and maybe a head shorter than Darren; a little older, too. Where was Benito?

I looked up at Hank as I walked through the hall. “What happened to Benito?” I asked.

Hank didn’t respond; he didn’t even look my way. Neither did Blondie.

Whatever.

My headache was slowly subsiding, thanks to my pain meds, but my body still felt like shit. My jaw and stomach were sore from all the rapping and retching I did last night. I still couldn’t believe I did all that in front of Darren. I hadn’t anticipated him for another day, but I had obviously done a fantastic job at getting myself totally wasted in less than thirty minutes. Otherwise, I would have probably been terrified out of my mind. I couldn’t

even remember the last time I'd gotten drunk like that, much less had a sip of hard liquor.

Oh, wait. I do remember. And the ending wasn't very pretty for me then either.

What a sight I must have been. Had I been sober, things probably would have ended very differently. Then again, I probably wouldn't have snuck out at all if I had known Darren was back. Fuck.

I wondered if Darren enjoyed my little performance. Probably not. I was sure he was pissed with my recent behavior and the fact that I had snuck away from my guards. If anything, I was just showing him their weak spots. He should really be thanking me. Maybe that was what he wanted to discuss.

The patio was on the east side of the house and, of course, faced the ocean. The roof covered the entire span of the patio area, with large dark brown pillars to support it. The ground was an array of different orange-colored bricks laid out in a swirl pattern while large green ferns decorated each corner. There was a long glass table fit to sit eight people in the middle with bronze chairs all around it. Soft patio furniture strategically scattered around here and there, and a small fireplace centered between it all.

I sat down at Darren's usual right while he read something on a tablet in his hands; he ignored my entrance completely until he was finished with his business. He was dressed casually today; a white dress shirt, buttons undone at the top, sleeves rolled to the elbows, no tie, and khaki dress pants. His hair was stylishly messy while that sexy light brown shadow lingered on his jaw and chin. At least Darren had one good thing going for him—he was fantastic to look at until he caught you looking, and then your heart stopped a little.

When he finally looked up at me, he had an uneasy smile on his face, but my scowl remained as I sat back in my chair. Breakfast was immediately placed down before us by the staff; scrambled eggs and slice bananas for me, an omelet for Darren.

“So how's the jaw now?” he asked casually, but I could hear the snide undertone of his voice.

The nerve of this fucker. I felt the grip on my fork tighten as my mouth formed into a tight little smirk.

“Never better,” I said with a hard glare. My jaw was still stiff and talking tired it out quickly, but I wouldn't give Darren the satisfaction. I

could feel his eyes on me, lingering longer than usual. They almost burned.

“Good,” Darren finally said as he started on his plate. “It seems like it must be perfectly healed now considering how well you used it last night.” There was that lingering smirk on his mouth I was looking for.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the show.”

“Yes, it was very entertaining, actually. I’ve never seen someone imitate Ludacris so well.”

I slowly chewed my sliced banana before swallowing. “Consider yourself a lucky witness. I wasn’t expecting you for another day.”

“So because I’m not here, that suddenly means my rules no longer apply to you?”

I shrugged. “It just means I care less.”

“I see,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee. “Would you care more if I told you your actions cost Benito his life?”

“Nope,” I said automatically, taking another bite, even though my stomach squirmed a little at his confession.

I had my suspicions about Benito. I warned him. Once again, my ability to manipulate Darren was proving to be a productive experiment. Had I planned for Darren to kill him? Would there have been any other result? It seemed either you followed Darren’s rules or you died. I doubted there was an in between.

“Really?” Darren said, actually sounding fascinated.

“Really,” I said staring at him. “You obviously see those poor girls you sell as less than human. Why shouldn’t I assume the same thing about anyone who works for you?”

Darren considered me for a moment, a smirk forming on his lips.

“Interesting point,” he said slyly as he watched me. “Though, you should be careful with a statement like that. I may make you regret those words one day.”

“Yeah, I bet,” I snapped, turning back to my plate, but he was still watching me, his fingers scratching his jaw while his eyes wandered.

“It’s all just so fascinating, Jaden.”

I stopped in the middle of my cutting to read him. “What is?”

“How quickly your desensitization has grown.”

My desensitization...

“Wasn’t that one of your goals?” I said blankly, cutting into my eggs with my fork.

“Yes, but again, you surpass my expectations.”

I looked up at him, my brows furrowed in confusion.

“I just inadvertently made you kill one of your own guards. How is that surpassing your expectations?”

“Benito was expendable. He should have anticipated your behavior, and he didn’t. Instead, he lost his nerve thanks to your manipulative and childish antics. Yes, he may have dug his own grave, Jaden, but you handed him the shovel.”

I smirked.

“Happy to help,” I said with a genuine smile.

Darren actually threw his head back and laughed, that deep chuckle rolling into my ears and making my stomach flutter.

“Oh, God... you are so perfect.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied, pushing my half-eaten eggs around.

“So are you less hungover to discuss more pressing topics?”

I huffed. My whole life was one big hangover now. What difference did it make?

“Not really, but you’re going to discuss them anyway,” I said. “So by all means.”

He smiled and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. My eyes couldn’t help but follow the tattoos down his bare arms, my eyes lingering over the golden hawk that clutched that shield so tightly.

“Your personal trainer has been selected.”

I turned my head toward him and gave him a confused look.

“My what?” I asked.

“She starts tomorrow,” Darren said as he took another sip of his coffee. “And you are to follow everything she says. No arguments or complaints.”

“Wait. Who is this person?” I asked, gaping at him.

“Her name is Holly. She is going to help you get back on your feet until you’re ready to leave the island.”

I scowled at him. “I don’t need help. I just need to be left alone.”

Darren rolled his eyes, sagging his shoulders, and gave me the most irritated look.

“Really? Are we seriously going to do this already?”

I scoffed at him. “Did you expect anything less?” I asked with a smirk. Like I’d suddenly stop arguing with him. What a tool.

“What I expect is for you to shut up, stop arguing, and do what you’re told.”

“And where has that ever gotten you?”

I could have sworn I caught the sight of a few grays at his sides earlier. God knows they’d be on my account, and I enjoyed the thought of aging him prematurely. Maybe that was how I’d ultimately kill him. Stress him to death.

“I could ask you the same question, smartass,” Darren said with a growl.

I shrugged my shoulders. I was beyond over this.

“Just so you know, I don’t expect Holly’s first day to go very well.”

“Holly’s first day will go exactly as expected, without issue and one-hundred-percent successful. And should anything interrupt that, there will be severe consequences,” he snarled.

I snorted. “Like what? You’ve already killed my entire family. What more can you do to me?”

I watched him with a glare as his shoulders squared and his jaw clenched. Darren’s eyes darkened as we stared each other down while I waited for him to admit the truth.

“I’m waiting,” I snarled.

“Then you’ll keep waiting,” he finally said. “Because aside from your uncle, I’ve done nothing to them.”

I shot up from my chair, completely outraged with his obvious lie. “You fucking liar!” I shouted at him, my jaw now flaring in pain. “What did you do to the—”

Before I had understood what was happening, Darren had risen, grabbed my throat, and hauled me to his chest. My heart practically backflipped while my stomach nearly jumped to my mouth as my hands gripped his thick wrist. Darren’s grip wasn’t as tight as it usually was, but it was certainly possessive as I hid my eyes from him.

“Look at me, Jaden,” he said with that dark, steady voice; the same voice that advocated against arguing. My sass no longer entertained my villain.

Begrudgingly, I dragged my unwilling eyes from his chest to feel like I’d been punched in the gut when they finally settled on those deep dark blues of his.

“What is the one thing I told I would never do?”

“There are a lot of things you said you wouldn’t do. Like letting me go, for example,” I replied through gritted teeth.

“And that one will never change,” he said gripping me a little tighter for emphasis. “Think back to rule six.”

My eyes wavered off to the side as I tried to remember the stupid fucking rules he had recited for me months ago, but then it became too obvious.

“Lie,” I finally bit out.

“That’s right. So before you start accusing me of shit I didn’t do, I suggest you calm the fuck down and check your attitude before I correct it myself.”

I glared at him a moment longer, anger seething through my veins, but he was right; he had said he was a man of his word. So did that mean he was still planning to kill them?

“So what *have* you done with them?” I asked, checking my tone before pissing him off even more than he already was.

“Nothing,” he said seriously.

I raised my eyebrow in suspicion. “Not a thing?” I questioned, hope floating in my chest.

“Aside from keeping track of them, no harm has come to them. Yet,” he said with that final warning. My stomach dropped. It wasn’t over. They were back to being leverage. But why? I was very aware of his hand still firmly wrapped around my throat, and I didn’t want to give it cause to tighten, but I had to know.

“Why? You had them all in the palm of your hand. Especially at my funeral,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

Darren’s eyes darkened as an evil smirk formed across his lips. I felt my heart quicken.

“I attended your funeral, Jaden. It was actually quite touching; however, my initial targets were not in attendance,” Darren said with a menacing grin.

My eyes immediately lit up. He went to my funeral...

He went to my fucking funeral...

But then it suddenly hit me.

My initial targets were not in attendance...

Did that mean?

Holy fuck! It did! They had gotten away!

I couldn't help but smile in his stupid fucking face. Mission accomplished.

"*Fucking. Win,*" I sneered with a smirk.

In a fit of rage, Darren released my throat with a hard shove, causing me to stumble back and my throat to ache, but the smile remained on my face.

"You won't be smiling for long when I find them. And I will find them, Jaden."

"Good luck." I smiled, my jaw now pulsing hard with a tired pain I fought to ignore. I had fucking won. I felt elated—light and airy—like I had finally accomplished something Darren couldn't prevent. I was pushing my luck with my smug attitude. Darren still had plenty of my other family members at his disposal, and even though my main focus was on my immediate, I didn't want anything to happen to the rest of my family. He might kill my family, but he would torture Jason to death... and I'd have a front row seat to that show. I was not fucking letting that happen.

"None needed," he said with a scowl. "Now, sit down and shut your mouth before I find a better use for it," Darren said sternly, and the smile disappeared from my face. I didn't need to challenge him any more than I already had.

The rest of our breakfast was spent in silence, and when it was over, Darren took a call rather than torture me further with some afternoon alone time. Instead, I was escorted back to my suite by Hank and Blondie, where I spent the rest of my day gazing out the window and had dinner alone. Eventually, the moon had risen, shining above the clouds, and I wondered if Jason saw the exact same moon as I did.

Maybe it wasn't as full wherever he was, or maybe it wasn't as bright, but tonight's moon burned with the hope that he was safe with my mom and brothers and that they were all right. I longed to be with them to the point of absolute agony. I wanted to wrestle with my brothers and hear them laugh as I tickled the shit out of them after a submission. I wanted to gossip with my mom about the latest celebrity bullshit because she enjoyed making fun of them all just as much as I did. But most of all, I just wanted to hear Jason's voice one last time. I wanted to feel every inch of him against me and never let him go. To see his rough, handsome face and those gorgeous green eyes would be enough to make my entire heart melt all over again, but the memory of him was only making it break deeper. My heart ached

for him like he was the blood missing from my veins. That night, I fell asleep on the window nook with a river flowing down my face.

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“Jaden. Jaden, wake up.”

I groaned and burrowed further into the pillow of the reading nook.

“Jaden, come on. Time to get up,” said a happy female voice I didn’t recognize.

“Fuck off,” I grumbled, pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

Whoever it was gasped. “Such language.” And then she huffed. “Come on, Jaden. Up, up, up.” She started clapping her hands together like that was somehow the magic code to get me to rise.

I begrudgingly turned around and glared at whoever the fuck was waking me up to find some petite young brunette with a way-too-happy round face and big white teeth. I rolled my eyes. My new physical therapist.

“Ugh. Holly, right?” I asked with an irritated tone.

“That’s right,” she said with a bright smile as if she were super proud of her name. Her lean, short figure was dressed in a sunflower yellow athletic tank top, light gray knee-length athletic leggings, running shoes, and her hair was up in a high ponytail with a matching yellow headband. She looked like a bee, buzzing around and annoying already.

“Okay, look, Holly,” I said with a drawn-out yawn. “I don’t know what they told you about me, but I don’t need your help. They’re just overreacting. I’m fine. So... you can probably just go now.”

She gave me a very confused look, but then she smiled. I wasn’t going to deter her from her mission.

“I was told you were going to difficult, but that’s okay,” she said with a smile. “I understand it can be hard to get back on the saddle, and it can be

even harder to admit that you've fallen and can't get back up in the first place, but don't worry, because I promise I will get you back up there in no time!"

Okay, now, her voice was annoying me. It was high pitched and almost nasally.

"Yeah, I'm gonna pass on that," I said, giving her a disinterested look, and laid back against the pillow, closing my eyes.

"Oh, come on, Jaden," she said with that annoying cheery voice, but then she made the mistake of putting her hands on my shoulder. "It'll be fu—"

On pure instinct, I grabbed her narrow wrist and twisted it away from my shoulder, holding it in place as I stared her down in warning. She gasped in shock as she attempted to pull away.

"Look, Holly, I might be injured, but I *can* still hurt you. And I really don't want to do that. So please... just go."

I released her wrist and turned back around, my back to her as I pulled the blanket back up to my shoulders with every intention of going right back to sleep.

"Jaden, I really don't want to have to alert Mr. Davis about this," she said with regret.

"Get him." I shrugged, not giving a shit. "Good luck, though." If she could even get through to him.

I heard a slow, disappointed sigh before her light footsteps headed for the door, closing it behind her. Good. I could go back to sleep now. But it wasn't meant to be; about two minutes later, and being nearly asleep, I thought I heard the door to my suite get ripped off its hinges. I flinched instinctively at the noise only to then find rough hands grabbing me by my upper arms and lifting me up from my pillow.

"What the FUCK did I tell you yesterday at breakfast?!" Darren roared at me. I flinched but found my voice as I glared at him.

"I could ask you the same thing!" I shouted back, my voice cracked and dry from the early morning.

"Get up, get dressed, and get your ass moving. Now!"

"Or what, Darren?" I snickered.

He couldn't physically hurt me, not without sending me back weeks of recovery, and any further mental punishment would only drive me further

into my depression. What the fuck did he think he had over me now? Maybe my family, but he already admitted who his real targets were.

Darren's eyes flickered for a second in frustration before they settled back on me, his lips curving into a sly grin.

"Or," he said with a smirk, "you're going to spend the entire day with me."

I furrowed my brows at him. Was he joking?

"What?" I said in shock.

"You heard me. Either you spend your day with Holly or you can spend it with me in my office, and believe me, Jaden, I can come up with plenty of things to keep you occupied," he sneered.

I scowled at him in disgust. I didn't want to spend a single second in his company, let alone an entire day with him. Even though it might give me some insight on his business, I somehow doubted he would divulge anything that would give him away. But I also really didn't want to spend the day with Holly either. I guess it had to come down to the lesser of two evils.

"Fine," I bit out. "I'll go with Holly."

"Good girl," he said and released me, dropping me back down onto my pillow. Darren turned and immediately headed for the door. "You have five minutes to get your ass ready," he said sharply and slammed the door shut behind him.

I rolled my eyes and begrudgingly sat up, resting my elbows on my knees and running my hands through my hair. I looked over at the clock to find it was fucking seven o'clock in the morning. Why the fuck were they waking me up so early?! And where the fuck was Hank and Blondie? Where was Ginsby?

Irritated, I shoved myself off the reading nook and practically stomped my way to the bathroom. Exactly four minutes later, I emerged from the bathroom; my hair was in a high ponytail, and I felt somewhat awake. I found clothes already laid out on my hospital bed and was surprised to find a pair of actual shorts rather than a stupid-ass skort. I picked up the white shorts and examined them, wondering if you could even call them shorts before they became straight up underwear. At least they were athletic and looked comfortable. There was also a matching white tank top with a built-in bra inside and a pair of hot pink running shoes.

Quickly changing into my new Darren-mandated outfit, I tightened my ponytail and headed toward the door, tentatively pulling it open. I was shocked to find it wasn't locked, but the shock instantly died away when I found Blondie and Hank standing guard on either side of the door. Well, duh.

Holly quietly paced the hallway in front of the door with a worried look on her face. Maybe she was nervous I'd be pissed at her for tattling on me. Good.

"Hey, tattletale," I mocked with a smartass grin on my face. I knew I was going to be forced into doing this anyway, so getting to piss Darren off at seven o'clock in the morning was my way of compensation. Worth every penny.

Holly immediately turned at the sound of my voice, her hands clasped together at the top of her chest like she was hoping for forgiveness or something.

"Oh, good, you're ready." She smiled and then nearly jumped in excitement. It'd be a miracle if I didn't punch this bitch in the throat in the next five minutes. It was seven in the morning, for fuck's sake.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorway expectedly, raising an eyebrow and awaiting the orders of my new temporary commander-in-chief.

"Care to explain why I'm awake at the crack ass of dawn?" I asked.

I loved that she flinched at my bluntness. I was curious to see how soon she'd get used to it.

"Yes. Come on," she said brightly, encouraging me to follow her. "I think you're really going to enjoy this."

"Not unless it involves me either going back to bed or getting piss drunk," I grumbled.

She giggled awkwardly in response as if I was joking or something. This was going to be a fun day.

She led me outside the house, with Hank and Blondie in tow, until we finally came to the shore. I realized then what she thought I was going to enjoy. It wasn't as if I hadn't ever seen a sunset before. Whoopsy-fucking-doo. And then I saw the yoga mats laid out in the sand. I rolled my eyes. How original.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Holly beamed as we stopped in front of the two mats, and she looked out at the sunrise. The same old light pinks, purples,

yellows, and oranges blurred with the sky while the sun fought its way up through the horizon to greet us.

“It’s great,” I said dismissively and moved to sit down on my mat. Holly joined me a moment later.

A small white porcelain bowl with a lid and spoon sat on both our mats, along with bottles of water with lemon, cucumber, and mint. I lifted the lid to the bowl to find oatmeal with sliced bananas, strawberries, and blueberries.

“I had our breakfast brought out for us,” Holly said like it was the best idea she’d ever had.

“Thanks,” I said as I picked up my spoon and started digging in. The oatmeal was soft enough to chew without bothering my jaw, and the water was actually pretty refreshing.

“I thought we might start out with some beginner’s yoga,” she said cheerily as we set our bowls aside. I looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Beginners? Seriously?” I was an advanced practitioner, for fuck’s sakes, not some goddamn beginner.

“Yes, since you’re still healing from your injuries, I didn’t want to push you too hard.”

How nice of her.

“Thanks for your concern, but I’ll decide my limits.” And with that, I immediately pushed myself up into a downward dog position and began to stretch out my calves. Holly sighed in defeat and followed my position.

For the next hour, Holly and I practiced semi-advanced yoga. Much to my frustration, my wrist and torso ached whenever I experienced too much pressure. My wrist was mostly healed, but my ribs were still on the mend. Hank and Blondie stood off about twenty feet away, their eyes ever watchful as I tried to pretend they weren’t there.

I was beyond pissed off that I was seriously lacking in my yoga skills. My muscles were tense from their little hibernation, and with every change in position, my joints cracked in protest. Sunrise yoga didn’t relax me as Holly had planned. If anything, it just made me angrier at Darren for weakening me. I wanted to crush him, feel the bones in his neck snap like he had done to me, but I had to get better first.

It didn’t take long for Holly to feel the heated rage coming off me, so she suggested we meditate to clear our minds of all negativity. I tried. I tried really fucking hard to focus on the sound of the rolling waves crashing

against the shore, the feel of the warm breeze on my skin as the loose strands of my hair tickled my face, and the smell of the salt in the air; but all I could concentrate on was how my heart beat with a rage so intense I thought my chest would burst.

I wanted to murder Darren. I wanted to violently rip him from limb to limb until he was nothing but a bloody puzzle of human remains. But that wasn't going to happen... at least not with my bare hands.

After pretending to calm down for a half hour, Holly decided we should get up and move on to the next stupid activity she had planned for me. We walked back into the house, heading toward the sunroom at the south end of the house. The room was all windows, giving everyone another perfect view of the ocean.

Set up in front of the windows were two easels holding large blank white canvases. Trays of colorful paint and brushes were laid out on tables next to the easels. I immediately crossed my arms and turned to Holly.

"What the fuck is this?"

She flinched again but recovered quickly. "Have you ever painted before, Jaden?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "No. I have no interest in painting."

"I thought it would be fun. You can paint whatever you want. Whatever is on your mind. Just let the colors speak for themselves," she beamed at me.

The only color that had any influence at the moment was the red I saw in my vision. What the fuck was this? Some kind of therapy attempt? Fuck off with that shit.

"So, what, you're suddenly my therapist now? This is supposed to be some bullshit form of therapeutic relaxation?"

"Well, no," she said, her voice becoming small. "I just thought—"

"You just thought what? That I'd paint you a little picture of the fucked-up shit inside my head so you can see what it looks like?"

"Jaden," she said, taken aback at my abrasiveness. "I'm just trying to help you."

I leaned into her, my jaw now aching from clenching. "You can't help me, Holly. No one can. It's not allowed. I'm on my own in this."

"Miss Jaden," Hank called out to me from outside the doorway, my warning to shut my mouth before I gave away too much. I scowled in his direction before turning back to Holly.

"I am not fucking painting," I said a little too loudly and turned to walk out of the room.

I made it to the doorway only to stop in my tracks when I suddenly caught sight of Darren standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest as he stared me down. I could feel the icy chill of his glare as it crawled up my spine, warning me to comply. Apparently, I would be painting after all.

My hands balled into tight fists at my sides until my knuckles turned white. With an irritated groan, I turned and begrudgingly marched back into the sunroom, a slight look of fear now plastered on Holly's face. "Fine! You want me to paint?" I growled as I stormed toward the easel. I grabbed the canvas and slammed it onto the floor. "Then let's fucking paint!" I then took the tray, set it on the floor next to the canvas, and dipped my fingers into the black inky acrylic paint.

Kneeling down, I traced my paint-covered fingers angrily along the canvas, brushing it in all different directions. For several minutes, my blood rushed wildly as I swept more globs of black paint along the canvas, occasionally mixing in some gray or red. Holly stood off to the side, completely ignoring her canvas as she watched me uneasily. My heart raced while my breathing was quick and sharp; my blood pulsed through my veins with every stroke of my finger. I was sure finger painting on the floor wasn't what Holly had in mind, but hey, at least I was participating.

When I was satisfied with my canvas, I took the bottom of my fist, covered it in a giant gob of blood red paint, and slammed it down on the middle right area of the painting. I then quickly picked it up and roughly placed it back on the easel to watch the red paint from my fist begin to slowly drip down the canvas.

My masterpiece.

Holly said to let the colors speak for themselves, and I did. Those colors spoke a thousand words, but they would never be heard. No one on this fucking island was listening to those words; no one would even care to understand them... except one, and he would punish me for it.

I looked down at my bare hands covered in black and red paint like I had murdered someone with the blackness of my own heart. I turned my back on the painting and a concerned Holly as I walked out of the room toward the bathroom. I didn't even care that I got wet paint on any handle I

touched as I vigorously washed my hands in the sink, rinsing my darkness away.

And when I was clean, I parked my ass on the bathroom floor, pulled my knees to my chest, ran my hands through my hair, and took several deep breaths to calm down. I wanted to scream; I wanted to cry, and rebel, and break all kinds of shit, but it would do no good. I was not helping myself here. Holly was here to make me better, but the only thing she had successfully done was piss me off.

This was exactly why I didn't need her!

I didn't know what the fuck Darren was thinking. Did he think she'd somehow annoy me back to health? Maybe it was my motivation to get better, so I'd never have to see her stupid ass face again. Darren did have a sick sense of humor.

After ten minutes of trying to calm my shit down, I heard a knock on the bathroom door.

"Jaden? Are you all right?" came a timid voice from the other side.

"I'm fine, Holly. I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay, take your time. I'll be just outside."

Great.

After my minute was up, I stood and caught my reflection in the mirror. I didn't recognize her. And I shouldn't because technically, she wasn't even alive anymore. She died a long time ago in an alley from a drug overdose. And the thing that replaced her was nothing shy of a failure.

No. That wasn't true. I had successfully completed my goal. I had escaped and got my family out of Darren's reach. That was all I really wanted. I knew someone would eventually catch me, but as long as I had gotten the job done first, then it would be worth it. I would pay those consequences if it meant I could save them. And I did, so I was. I had to take the bad with the good. I had to find my colors in the dark even if the only color was red; otherwise, I'd be swallowed whole and never resurface.

As much as I hated to admit it, I had to give Holly a chance. I doubted her skills as a physical therapist could help me, but maybe I could at least be grateful for her company. After all, she was the only one allowed to talk to me casually.

I rubbed my face with my hands, trying to dispel the anger in my eyes before I opened the door and leaned against the frame. Holly was sitting on

a bench in the hallway. Hank and Blondie remained standing at their posts in front of the sunroom.

“Jaden, are you okay? I didn’t think—” Holly spoke quickly, like she was going to apologize, but I cut her off.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry you had to see that, but I have a very short fuse, and I’m not very good at controlling my anger. At least right now.”

Holly smiled, pleasantly surprised by my apology. “It’s okay, Jaden. I understand. Don’t worry, though. We will figure this out together.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. There would be a lot of shit to figure out in the next few weeks.

“So what’s next on this crazy train of yours?” I asked with a smirk.

She positively beamed.

“Well, it’s a bit early, but I thought we could have lunch on the patio. Are you hungry?”

I wasn’t really that hungry, but whatever. I’d be the good little puppy and follow.

“Sure,” I said and allowed her to lead me out to the patio, Hank and Blondie hot on my heels.

Our lunch had been placed on a small round bronze table for two at the far corner of the patio, closest to the water. As we sat down, the staff poured us the same detox water we had on the beach and then removed the lids covering our plates. The moment I saw it, I almost flipped it off the table in rage and disgust.

A steaming bowl of chicken stir-fry sat in front of me, mocking and distasteful.

“Something wrong?” Holly asked as she picked up her fork, concern all over her face again. I quickly looked up to brush it off.

“No. It’s fine,” I said with a half-smile. It was not fine. I never wanted to see another chicken stir-fry in my life, let alone eat one! My time at the warehouse had completely ruined stir-fry for me forever.

“Do you not like stir-fry?” Holly asked.

“No, it’s fine, I just... who chose our lunch for the day?”

Holly furrowed her brows in confusion. “I did,” she replied, taking a quick bite.

“Oh. Okay then.” I guess no one told her.

“But every meal required approval from Mr. Davis first,” she added.

“Ah. Of course,” I gritted.

Mr. Davis and I would be having words later.

We ate in silence for a while until Holly attempted to make small talk about the weather, which I reluctantly obliged. She talked about how summer was her favorite time of year and tried to get me to talk about my favorite season. She wanted to know my favorite everything, actually, which was rather annoying. Fall, Christmas, purple, wolf, Limp Bizkit, and ironically enough, *Goodfellas*.

Holly's methods of figuring me out through means of conversation were interesting to observe as she danced around subjects I knew were forbidden for her to ask about. She neglected to ask about my family, where I was born, or where I had gone to school. I almost found it comical how she carefully tiptoed around anything that wasn't a generic question, especially since she was doing a good job. It seemed as though she were trying to remind me of all my favorite things, to motivate me to experience them again as if they still had the power to make me happy. I appreciated the efforts, but I was more interested in turning the conversation to her.

"How did you come to accept employment here?" I asked. Holly chewed her food as her eyes focused on the table, her mind clearly deliberating her answer. Finally, she swallowed, but didn't meet my gaze.

"I was recruited from the nearby hospital on the mainland."

I raised my eyebrows. She didn't exactly come off as a native.

"You live on the mainland?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm doing my residency at the hospital there."

I furrowed my brows in confusion.

"How are you able to complete your residency and still do this?"

"I requested two months leave." She smiled.

"Why would you do that? Won't it screw you up?"

She folded her lips together as if she didn't want to answer my question, but I already knew the answer.

"Never mind," I said. "It makes sense now." I was sure Darren was paying her a small fortune to come out here and be a live-in physical therapist.

"When an opportunity comes along to pay off your student loans, you jump on it before it disappears," she said sadly.

"No, I get it. You don't have to feel bad about it. I'd probably do the same thing."

She nodded and began to push her remaining food around with her fork. I looked down at mine. I'd eaten maybe a quarter of it.

"Did you not like your lunch?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Small stomach." It was a miracle I hadn't thrown up yet.

After the staff had cleared our plates, Holly suggested we lounge on the beach for a while to let our stomachs digest. I was agreeable to that, as long as she remained quiet for once. We relaxed on the most comfortable chaise lounge chairs imaginable with a large beach umbrella overhead to protect us from the sun. Hank and Blondie sat next to a tree about a hundred feet from us in regular lounge chairs.

As I laid against the chaise, I realized I had done more activities in these last few hours than I had in weeks. And I was suddenly exhausted for some stupid reason. Before I knew it, I was out like a light.

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9

DARK MEMORIES

Pain suddenly exploded on the side of my head as I flew into the concrete wall, unable to slow my momentum. It didn't matter much since I was already on to the next wall, the back of my head aching like it had split in half. I felt the snap of my wrist as it crunched painfully under my flesh and left me screaming in agony and terror. I tried to defend myself, I tried to hold my own, but I was weak, tired, and pathetic. I begged him to stop, pleaded with him, but he had his own agenda. He shut me up with a broken jaw instead. And then, when I thought it was over, the boa constrictor returned, snaking his arms around me and squeezing me until I was thoroughly broken and gone.

“Run from me again, Jaden. Because if it ever happens again, I can’t promise you I’ll stop next time.”

“Jaden, wake up.”

I woke with a jolt. Snapping my fist out in the direction of the voice, I connected with something soft and hard at the same time. A loud feminine grunt echoed in my ears as I finally opened my eyes to find Holly on the ground, clutching her face and looking up at me in shock while my hand ached something fierce.

Fuck.

“Shit, Holly, I’m so sorry,” I said quickly as I tried to calm my racing heart. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean it.”

“What the hell just happened?!” yelled Hank as he and Blondie rushed over.

“It was an accident,” I said to them, as Hank bent down to check Holly.

"I'm fine," she mumbled as her hands covered her nose, but I could see the blood begin to gush between her fingers. Fuck, I hoped it wasn't broken.

"Why did she hit you? What did you do?" Hank asked Holly a little too aggressively.

"It's not her fault," I dejected. "I was having a nightmare and just reacted when she woke me up."

Hank sighed in annoyance, shaking his head, and helped Holly stand. "I'll take Holly to see Ginsby. It looks like it's already starting to swell. You stay here," he said to me as he started to walk away with her.

I sighed deeply. "Fuck." I groaned under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. Blondie was still standing there, looking at me like I was a misbehaving toddler. "What?!" I shouted at him as he stared at me behind his stupid sunglasses.

"Nothing," he said as he put his hands up in surrender.

"Fuck this." I groaned. "I'm going for a walk."

I turned away from him and headed for the shore to get as far away from the house as possible. I was gonna hear so much shit for this later, but I didn't want to hear it now.

For the next hour, I wandered the island, exploring through the brush and palm trees with an obviously bored-out-of-his skull Blondie, who watched me from a polite distance. I attempted to learn the lay of the land before I was called back to the house, but nothing ever happened. Yet.

As I walked through the brush, I noticed all the different colored plants and the songs of the birds I kept hearing outside of my window. But as I watched a certain bird above me, I nearly ate the dirt as I tripped over a rather thick stick on the ground. Ignoring the slight ache in my side, I bent down and picked it up, noticing its light weight and rounded edges. It was a little longer than a normal baton but too short and weak to be a bo staff.

I continued my walk, casually spinning the stick in my hand, feeling the motion and smiling at the memory of twirling a familiar weapon in my hands. Unfortunately, the last time I held a bo in my hands hadn't ended well, but so what. The twirling was good therapy for my wrist since it was so light. Maybe I could eventually find something heavier when it became strong enough.

As I twirled, I looked down at my knuckles to notice they were a little bit red. My nightmares were getting worse, frequenting at least once a week now. The memories were growing darker, the pain so fresh in my mind, it

was like it happened yesterday. Waking up from one nightmare to the next didn't help. Each bloody and broken memory was a reminder I would never be able to fight Darren off, a reminder of how strong he was, and how fucked I was. You'd think it would amp up my fear of Darren, but in reality, it only made me want to kill him that much more.

"Miss Jaden," Blondie finally called, interrupting my thoughts. "It's time to head back to the house. Dinner will be served in an hour, and we need to get you ready."

"Right," I said and turned toward the direction of the house.

"Ah, I would leave the stick," Blondie suggested.

I looked down at it, finding it completely harmless, but agreed with him and placed on the ground where I would be able to find it again. I then headed back to the house, my stomach now in knots as I worried about Holly. I'd probably broken her nose. Fuck, I was such a shit.

When we got back to the house, I didn't see Hank or Holly and was instead escorted straight to my suite. I took a shower, made my hair into soft beach waves, put on a little makeup, and changed into a silky pink sundress. I was kind of hoping I'd catch less shit if I made an effort to please Darren with my appearance.

When I was ready, I was escorted by Blondie—still no Hank—to the dining room. Darren was not there yet, so I sat down and waited for the impending storm to arrive.

10

RED



I stood in the sunroom, scratching my chin and contemplating Jaden's latest work of art. Dark colors of black, gray, and red smeared beautifully across the canvas while a giant red blotch bled down the center. As if I had painted it myself, I had no trouble translating it... because it was the exact same shit in my head as well. The only difference was I reveled in my darkness, while Jaden was still trying to understand her own. Darkness—with the only color dominating it all being the same red that dripped down Jaden's painting. Red represented all the best things in my world—passion, anger, love, hate, blood... Jaden's hair. No wonder it was my favorite color.

Holly had conjured up this interesting exercise, and I knew Jaden would hate it, but at least the result was interesting to regard. Maybe I'd have her paint once a week just to see if the colors would change. Holly had a bunch of other stupid shit she wanted Jaden to do besides her physical therapy, all of it designed to either keep her busy or change her mentality on what was important. Part of it was for her to accept her place and learn to find happiness in it, no matter how minuscule it was.

The fact that Jaden had punched Holly in the face wasn't exactly a surprise, even if it was by accident. Her body was getting ready to fight again, and it needed to be curbed... or perhaps just controlled.

My world was too dangerous to allow Jaden to become soft, which was why the desensitization was so important. The fact that she didn't even blink when I told her about Benito had me wondering if she had planned it.

She knew what I would do to anyone who fucked with her, and she seemed to have used that to her advantage. I was more impressed than I was pissed since I didn't want anyone so susceptible to Jaden's manipulation guarding her to begin with. She was simply exposing my weakest links when they couldn't handle her anymore.

What a fantastic system.

A killer existed somewhere inside Jaden, and it was slowly exposing itself. The idea of making her more and more like me was becoming too intriguing to resist. Her talents needed to be consolidated, reformed, and controlled. But even after all of that was accomplished, one thing would still be missing.

That big red blotchy thing in the middle of the canvas.

It was time to increase her dependence on me. She'd love to hate me until she didn't know the difference anymore, and then I would tilt the scales in my favor. She'd be mine forever.

Turning on my heels, I left the painting behind and headed to the dining room where my lovely, angry little redhead was waiting. She was sitting right where she belonged, her knee silently bouncing under the table—her nervous tic. She must think I'd be pissed about what she did to Holly. She did break her nose, but Holly would live, and everything would resume as planned.

Watching Jaden from the hallway, I couldn't help but notice all the things I loved about her. That gorgeous hair, her soft skin, her small yet solid frame, and how carefully she studied her whereabouts. I knew she was listening for me, waiting for me to come in and start raging about Holly, but I had no intention to do that. At least not anymore when Jaden finally snapped her head around and saw me standing in the doorway.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked incredulously. I smirked.

"Long enough to know you're nervous about something," I replied. Jaden glared at me as I rounded the table. "Do you have something to be nervous about, princess?"

Her mouth formed into a tight line at her pet name. I loved that she hated it so much.

"I'm just curious as to how Holly is," she replied carefully.

"And what did you do to Holly?" I asked her.

She immediately narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t act like you don’t know,” she said with a tone far too strong for one in her position.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “I didn’t say I didn’t know. I said for you to tell me what you did to her. Or do you need more clarification?”

Jaden’s scowl came back full force, and I met it with my own, daring her to start shit with me. She instantly softened.

“I think I accidentally broke her nose,” she said regrettably. It almost sounded like an apology.

“You’d be correct.”

“Shit,” she said under her breath, turning back around in her chair.

I pulled my chair out and sat down. “Why did you hit her?”

“I told you, it was an accident,” she replied harshly.

“And how did the accident happen?”

“I had a bad dream, and she woke me up. I reacted; I couldn’t help it.”

I furrowed my brows at her. “What were you dreaming about?” She glanced at me.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, placing her elbows on the table and resting her head in her hands.

“It does when I’m the one who’s asking,” I replied sternly.

She looked back over to me, her head still in her hands. She didn’t want to answer, but she couldn’t lie either. She’d learned that much, at least. “I dreamt about our reunion in the jail cell after I got away,” she said gently.

I felt my fist tighten and my blood heat. I didn’t like the sound of that. “Not my fondest of memories.”

“Nor mine,” Jaden said quietly, and I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I trust it won’t need to happen again,” I said, unable to subside the venom in my voice.

She flinched and looked away, like that might somehow hide the memories flashing in front of her. I’d been brutal then, furious and unforgiving. In a way, I regretted it because I hadn’t just clipped Jaden’s wings, I’d fucking torn them from her body. She would never escape me again, and if that meant she’d have to learn to walk in her cage instead of fly, then so be it. Even though I hated it, I wanted that memory to last. I wanted her to remember how cruel I could be so she could learn to appreciate the times when I wasn’t.

“Jaden,” I warned her; I was still waiting for her answer. She flinched just the tiniest of a fraction, but it was noticeable to my eyes.

“No, Darren,” she said, hiding her mouth behind her folded hands. “It won’t.” Her eyes found mine as she said it like a vow—sharply and surrounded with conviction. She was angry with me, but she would have to get over it. Truthfully, I never wanted to hurt her like that again. I wanted her strong and durable, but if my princess needed a reminder of her place, that there was no escape from me, then I would do what was necessary to ensure that.

“Good,” I said, finalizing that conversation.

A few short moments later, our dinner was brought out, and I decided to entertain a new conversation.

“Tell me about your day with Holly,” I ordered as I began cutting into my steak.

Jaden finished chewing on her steamed carrots before she finally answered.

“She’s annoying as hell,” she answered, and it almost made me laugh. I agreed one hundred percent. “But she is someone to talk to so...”

So Jaden was lonely, after all. I knew I hadn’t been around much, but I was far too busy to keep flying back to the island to spend time with her, no matter how much I wanted to. Not to mention time away from me meant she could focus on herself, but that didn’t seem to be going so well. I hoped Holly would change that.

“I trust I don’t need to remind you to watch what you say to her,” I warned. Jaden scowled at me but softened it quickly when I caught her eye.

“Of course, although I’ve never seen someone tiptoe so well around someone’s past before in my life. Tell me, what lies did you give Holly about me to ensure her discretion?”

My mouth formed a tight line while my jaw instantly clenched. She was pushing me again, and I was only too happy to shove back.

“Holly is under the impression that you were in a car accident and that you lost your mother and younger brothers in it. It was obviously a traumatic experience for you and should never, under any circumstances, ever be discussed.” She nodded in acknowledgment. “I don’t think I need to remind you of what will happen to Holly should those conversations reach their limit.”

Jaden gulped back her water, swallowing like she had a lump in her throat before she answered. “No reminder necessary,” she replied grimly without looking at me.

“Good girl,” I said and went back to my dinner. Jaden silently worked on her own. To my surprise, she actually finished her entire plate, and when she was done, she relaxed into her chair, clearly lost in thought. I had a feeling I was going to hear all about it.

“I have a question for you,” she said carefully.

“Hmm?” I responded, slightly intrigued.

“Why did you approve a stir-fry for my lunch today?”

I couldn’t help but let the corners of my mouth curve. I had wondered how Jaden would react to Holly’s diet plan for her, especially today’s menu. And I was right in believing she’d be pissed. I didn’t even know why I allowed myself to torture her with traumatic memories, but maybe I just wanted to know where her mind was at and what she would and wouldn’t tolerate.

I wiped the corners of my mouth before answering. “Got a disdain for stir-fry now?”

Jaden’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you said we were done playing games,” she said sharply.

“We are,” I affirmed without looking at her. “I just wanted to see where your mindset is.”

“You mean you wanted to know if I was still haunted by the warehouse? You could have just asked. And the answer is yes.”

I groaned. “You would have never owned up to it, so don’t even try to suggest otherwise. If I want the truth without an argument or struggle, I will find other ways of extraction.”

“I just don’t understand why you care if it still affects me or not. I thought you were beyond sympathizing with me.”

“I am, but I still have to make an effort in understanding why you react to certain things the way you do. It’s part of your psychology. For example, why you couldn’t care less if the men I assign to protect and watch over you are dead because of you, yet the life of someone with no benefit to you is somehow more important. You place value on the lives of others even though you have no business making that determination.”

“Oh, and you do? If you can place value on the lives of others, then why can’t I?”

I chuckled. “I’ve already made that determination more times than I can count. The difference is I eliminate people who have lost their value to me. You try to eliminate people with value and protect those who lack it.”

She scowled, but I just found it cute. “Your idea of value and my idea of value are two very different ideas.”

“That’s why mine is the only one we’ll be relying on,” I said.

“Shocker,” she replied and leaned back against her chair, looking out the window. I expected that to be the end of the conversation, but I should have known better.

“What happens when I no longer remain *valuable* to you?” she asked.

That, I flat out laughed at.

“It’d probably be the best thing to ever happen to me,” I said honestly while taking a sip of my wine. Jaden’s eyes went wide, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Though I doubt it will ever happen. You are quite simply the biggest pain-in-the-ass liability I have ever risked, but for some fucking unexplainable reason, you are worth it to me.”

She was silent before she replied again. “I’ll grow old someday,” she said blankly as if I had no idea of the sort.

“As will I.”

“And you’re going to tell me my value will remain the same when I’m old? I’d bet my left hand that your future youthful mistress will have more value to you than I will by then.”

I rolled my eyes at the ridiculous idea. I doubted I’d even live long enough to see Jaden grow old. Most men in my position didn’t simply just die of old age. Our deaths were met by the bullets that bore our names and called us home. Another reason I made sure to keep my body in perfect fighting condition at all times. Even in my sixties, I planned to deliver as much hell and chaos to my enemies as I did now. Nothing would slow me down until I was dead and in the ground.

Jaden would be no different. She would follow my philosophy, and in return, her body would reward her and, eventually, me as well. She was kidding herself if she thought I was so trivial that I would just fuck anything with a pretty face after her. I’d had enough women in my life to the point where I couldn’t even see their faces anymore. They were meaningless, dull in comparison. She didn’t know it, but she had officially ruined me for anyone else, and the idea of having anyone else but her had my blood boiling. There was no one but her. Always and forever. But still, her comment disappointed me. I furrowed my brows as I answered her question.

“Have I really led you to believe the only thing I value in you is your beautiful face?” I said sincerely.

Now that threw her for a whirl. She furrowed her brows in confusion, almost looking dumbfounded. After chewing on her tongue for a moment, she finally met my gaze.

“Don’t pretend that men like you don’t exactly appreciate age in their wives,” she said cautiously.

“And what do you know of men like me?”

Her eyes narrowed again in challenge. “I’m not stupid, Darren. Don’t think I’m so quick to presume my value will not diminish in time. You may one day grow bored with me and seek amusement elsewhere.”

I fucking laughed. “The same way a child gets bored building their blocks only to knock them down so they can build them back up again?”

Jaden didn’t miss my subtle hint, the realization of it written all over her face. And then she scowled.

“So you admit that I am just a toy to you?” she said incredulously. I rolled my eyes again, tiring of the subject matter.

“You are not *just* a toy to me, Jaden. You already know your future with me, so I don’t know why you’re making this argument.”

“Because I am having difficulty trying to understand why I am so *valuable* to you, yet you treat me like total shit!”

I slammed my palm onto the table, grabbing her attention in full force and finding joy in watching her body jolt in response.

“That’s enough, Jaden,” I roared at her, her body physically retreating in her chair. “You know the rules. Break them, and I will punish you. I will not be blamed when you reap the consequences of your actions.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it! You can’t deny the fact that you love to punish me like the sick and twisted asshole that you are!” she nearly shouted at me.

Bolting up from my chair, my hand gripped Jaden’s throat and hauled her up from her seat, her small hands gripping my wrist while her nails dug into my skin. I loved that feeling.

“And you can’t deny the fact that you love it when I punish you, princess. I bet that pussy of mine is on fire right now just thinking about all the ways I could fuck this sudden defiance out of you.”

And fuck if I didn’t want to right there in front of Jaden’s bodyguards. I couldn’t deny the fact that most days I loved it when she pushed me, when

she challenged me, when I got to punish her. I thrived on it. But she was fucking lying to herself if she didn't love it when I took charge of her. When I forced her to submit to me, she'd gotten off on it, just like I taught her to.

Jaden's mouth formed a tight line, her jaw clenched while she stood on her toes from the height I was holding her. She hadn't said a word in response, probably because she knew I'd prove her wrong if I decided to reach into her panties and find them soaking wet. But I wasn't planning to leave this argument empty-handed.

"Now, you can apologize for your smart mouth with a damn good kiss or you can spend the rest of the evening with Holly. What's it going to be?"

She crinkled her nose and pursed her lips with a cute little scowl. I knew Holly would be the seller.

"Well, aren't you the negotiator from hell," she growled and then tilted her head up for me. On a smirk, I met her the rest of the way, pressing my lips into hers, delving into the softness of her mouth and tasting the sweetness of her tongue. Fuck, I loved the taste of her. Missed it like a goddamn drug addict. My blood was on fire with heated anticipation. It'd been so long since my mouth had claimed hers; the feeling of her lips competing for turf, her tongue losing ground as I took what was mine.

God, finally.

I wanted to keep this fire going, but Jaden wasn't pissed off enough. I wanted that anger of hers; I wanted to feel that burn I craved so much. And I knew just how to fucking get it.

11

PUSH



Darren's hands crept up to my face, his thumbs tracing along my cheeks as he stared down at me. Cold blue fell into me while heat traveled along my face. I could feel that stare of his—so sharp, so penetrating—all the way down to my bones. It made my stomach tighten and my heart flutter.

Darren's lips curved into a smirk before he bent down and kissed my forehead. He then released my face and took hold of the knot of his tie, his eyes never leaving mine. After loosening the tie, he enveloped the dark gray fabric around his hand and gently spun me away from him. A small gasp of panic escaped my lips as he then wrapped the tie around my eyes and tied it behind my head, essentially blindfolding me.

"Darren, what are you doing?" I griped, my hands rising automatically as if to defend myself against some unknown threat, but Darren just quickly enclosed them in each of his fists.

"Shhh," he whispered into my ear, bringing our fists closer to my chest. "Come with me."

I felt fear rise throughout my body, my blood rushing and my heart racing as Darren began to lead me through the house. I didn't like this. Not one fucking bit. I didn't like to have to rely on his guidance to maneuver me through the house to God knew where. I fucking hated that he had once again forcefully increased my vulnerability.

My fists tightened in his hold as he pressed me forward. My feet remained on the tiled floor while I tried to focus on where he was leading

me. Eventually, we stopped, and Darren released my hands to pull the blindfold away. I blinked several times to adjust to the light before my eyes to finally settled on my painting. I took an immediate step away from it only to have my retreat blocked by the wall of a man behind me.

“Tell me about this,” Darren ordered, his hand gesturing to my painting.

I folded my arms in a huff. “No thanks,” I said and turned to walk away, but his hands wrapped around my arms and hauled me back to him.

“I wasn’t asking, Jaden,” he growled.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You should know by now that I am done caring about what you want.”

On a scowl, I quickly turned in his arms and shoved him away from me. I mostly ended up pushing myself away, but he did take a small step back.

“Then maybe I should just be done caring about myself altogether!” I shouted at him.

“Jaden,” he warned, those dark eyes threatening and domineering as he took a step toward me. I couldn’t help but take one step back, my heart rate now spiking.

“Don’t!” I yelled, pointing my finger at him because that was the smart thing to do. “Don’t push me on this, Darren. You might be ready for that can of worms, but I’m not,” I argued, now pointing at the painting behind me.

“I disagree, which is exactly why I’m going to push you, princess,” he said dangerously, taking another step. He was approaching me as if I was some kind of wounded animal, ready to pounce at any second. And I was ready to flee.

“You know I’ll just push back,” I replied, eyeing him carefully.

“You’ll fight me for as long as you can, but you know how that ends.”

“Shut up,” I spat, my fists clenching at my sides. I could feel my knuckles going white.

“You painted some dark shit, Jaden. Own up to it,” he said, his voice deadly calm as he continued to slowly advance. My heart was pounding out of my chest as I felt the adrenaline begin to course through my veins. Things were about to get very bad.

“Of course, it’s dark, you asshole! I’m surrounded by nothing *but* darkness!”

“I’m very aware of what surrounds you, Jaden. Maybe it’s time you stop fighting it and start embracing it.”

“Oh, fucking A. You wanna pull this shit again?” I groaned.

“Watch your mouth,” he growled, and I felt myself shudder. “Open your eyes, Jaden. That shit you painted, I see that shit in my head twenty-four-seven. You’re becoming more and more like me every day... and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I screamed, my hands going to my ears to block out his stupid words. Suddenly, I felt his hand tangle with my hair and yank. A sharp pain shot through my scalp as my head was forced back to look up at Darren, his other hand wrapped around my throat. Again.

“Cuss at me one more time, Jaden, and you’ll find my sympathy for your injuries cease to exist,” he roared down at me. I felt myself flinch as I shrank a little, my eyes closing to protect them from his piercing glare. “Eyes, princess, now,” he demanded.

Forcing them open, I looked up as far away as I could, hoping to avoid his glare, but it was impossible with his height. Dark ocean blue consumed me all over again, sending wave after wave of ice down my body. My hands pressed up against his hard chest as I felt my fear get the best of me. Untamable tears formed at the corners of my eyes, and I fought with everything I had not to let them fall in front of him.

“I’m nothing like you,” I nearly whispered, somehow finding my voice.

The smirk on his face made my gut twist in agony. Darren then released my throat and bumped my nose with the tip of his finger. “Not yet... but you’re so close. My little wolf has finally caught the scent of blood.”

I struggled against him, but it was so useless with his fingers still wrapped in my hair. “Careful what you wish for, Darren,” I breathed, watching as his brows furrowed.

“Who do you belong to, Jaden?” he asked sharply, those eyes piercing and harsh.

“You,” I spat in disgust.

“Goddamn right,” he replied and kissed me.

The moment his lips met mine, my body ignited as if someone lit a match over an oil spill. Hot blood rushed through my veins, heating every inch of my skin as he kissed me as though he were starved. And I suppose he was. And somehow, I found myself kissing him right back. But this kiss was not some kind of happy reunion between our lips; it was a full-on war. Because he wasn’t the only one starving.

With his one hand still wrapped in my hair and the other lined up against my back to clutch me to him, I found my hands clinging to the lapels of his jacket in an attempt to get closer. Liquid heat pooled between my legs as my body slowly began to reacquaint itself with the man who claimed to own it. It remembered him well.

I could almost feel Darren's thundering heart beat under my hands as he kissed me with such aggressive passion. I was afraid he might forget and injure me again, but at this rate, I didn't care... because I wanted to be the one to forget.

In my passion, my lips battled with his, our tongues fighting for territory, and our teeth drawing blood if need be. I hadn't felt this alive in so long, and I was desperate to feel something other than utter hopelessness. I might never willingly make love to Darren, but I could certainly hate-fuck the shit out of him.

Eventually, Darren's hands found my hips and lifted me to straddle him. His lips found my neck as I wrapped my arms around his neck to hold myself up. His rough kisses turned into bites, and bites turned into sucking. I knew my neck would soon display the color of his affection.

Before I realized we had even left the sunroom, Darren was pushing me down onto a bed. He somehow managed to carry me up the stairs, to what I assumed was his bedroom, without me even noticing. And for some reason, that pissed me off. With my back on the bed, Darren rested his hands above my head and grinned down at me. I smirked back.

Before I knew what I was doing, I pulled his left arm out from under him, causing him to shift his balance, but I had already used my left leg to shift his and pushed my right hip forward. Darren's side hit the bed, and I immediately lifted myself over the top of him. He let it happen. He could have easily stopped my advance, but for some reason, he didn't. Instead, he just smirked up at me with that shark-like grin of his as he rested on his elbows. God, he was sexy... and it just made me hate him even more. But I wasn't given much chance to dwell on it.

Darren suddenly pushed off his elbows and nearly launched his upper body at me, and if his arms hadn't immediately wrapped around my waist, I would have fallen off him. His mouth met mine in another passionate assault of a kiss, and it only made me push back harder. I wrapped my arms around his neck, my hands venturing over his back while more heat pooled between my legs. Fuck, I wanted this. And I didn't even know why.

It wasn't long before Darren started pulling at my dress, nearly ripping the damn thing off along with my bra and thong. He then spun us around, my back gently hitting the bed while Darren immediately went for his jacket, pulling it off in a hurry. His breath was heavy with anticipation, and I fought to keep mine at bay, but with my racing heart, it was difficult to tame.

The moment he was free of all restriction, Darren slammed into me with ease. I groaned out loud from the impact as he rammed himself into my core. And it felt fantastic.

"Fuck. I've waited too long for this," Darren nearly moaned as he slowly pumped in and out.

"Your fault." I moaned as my hands gripped the sheets beneath me.

"It was my punishment," he gritted as his hands came to rest just above my shoulders, "for allowing you the opportunity to escape me."

"Lesson learned, I'm sure," I replied, my voice husky with lust.

"Never again." He groaned and pulled my legs up to wrap around his hips.

Darren drove deeper, harder, and I fought to keep myself in place as pleasure overrode every sense in my body. I wanted more of him, needed it.

"Oh, fuck." I moaned, unable to hold it back. Darren immediately wrapped his hand in my hair and yanked my head back.

"There's that mouth again," he growled and kissed me, pumping into me even harder, as if that were somehow possible. Pleasure and pain began their collision as my impending orgasm began to flutter. I was ready to explode.

When Darren finally released my lips, I moaned so loudly it could almost be classified as a scream. His mouth moved down to my ear, gently biting into my lobe. "My favorite sound," he drawled into my ear, and every inch of me shivered. His lips then moved to my neck, kissing and biting and making my skin come alive. I couldn't help but scratch my nails down the back of his arms. My hips pushed forward to meet his every thrust, giving me just enough to push me over the edge.

"Oh, God." I moaned, my orgasm finally taking over and sending me right into that blissful rush of heat.

Before my orgasm was even over, Darren quickly pulled out, flipped me onto my hands and knees, and rammed right back into me, sending my pleasure to new heights. Cries of absolute ecstasy echoed from my throat as

Darren grabbed my hair and held my head tightly in place while his other hand took my hip in a bruising grip.

“Fuck. I’m never going more than a few hours without fucking you, princess.” He groaned. “I’ve forgotten how good you feel.” He grunted as he drove in and out of me, leaving me breathless and begging for more as I rode out the remaining waves of my orgasm. As it died down, the pain began to bloom at my side, but I ignored it, too engrossed with what was going on behind me.

“Who do you belong to, Jaden?” Darren growled behind me, twisting my hair tighter in his fist and fucking me with that much more force. When I didn’t answer right away, he slapped my ass hard enough to leave a bruise and forced a scream from my throat. He wasn’t as rough as he usually was, but that didn’t mean he was exactly gentle either. “Answer me, little girl, now,” he barked.

“Ah!” I groaned as the pressure against my G-spot grew all over again. “You, you selfish bastard!” I yelled as my fingers nearly clawed through the sheets.

Another smack to my ass for the sass. “And don’t you ever fucking forget it.”

A few seconds later, Darren finally found his release and emptied himself into me completely, finishing off my second orgasm. When it was over, he released me, and I fell flat on my stomach, fully satisfied and out of breath.

“So no more stir-fry, right?” I asked, my chest heaving for air. With each breath, the ache in my side I had ignored earlier continued to grow, becoming more and more noticeable, but not enough for me to give voice to my concern. I had probably only strained the muscle a bit. No big deal.

I could feel Darren’s form lower, his lips finding my temple and kissing me softly. “No more stir-fry,” he affirmed gently.

I sighed in satisfaction, almost victorious, and closed my eyes only for a moment before exhaustion took over completely and surrounded me in blackness.



God-fucking-dammit.

I had been an idiot, a total fucking idiot. I had robbed myself of the greatest thing I had ever known just so I would learn never to allow it to slip through my fingers again. And though it had been well worth the wait, I would never put myself through that shit again, no matter what Jaden did. I wanted her whole so I could fuck her broken. The recovery time wouldn't be as long then.

Jaden was out like a light, and I wasn't really that surprised. I hadn't exactly gone easy on her, too anxious and desperate to finally have her again. Her body was spent as she laid beneath me, her soft milky white skin and long red hair contrasting beautifully against the dark green satin sheets. All I wanted to do was wrap those silky red strands around my fist and pull just to hear that gasp of desire leave her lungs. My heart started to race just thinking about her, and it made me realize how totally fucking obsessed I was.

I left Jaden to sleep, grabbed a pair of black sweatpants, and went into the bathroom for a quick shower. If I didn't walk away now, we wouldn't be leaving that bed for days, and Jaden was not up for that... yet.

Five minutes later, I was out of the shower, and my dick had finally calmed down. I changed into the sweatpants, all the while drying my hair with the towel. I could have sworn I heard Jaden call out my name, something she never did.

Panic struck me as I wrenched the bathroom door open and rushed over to her, trying to keep myself calm. Jade was hunched in a ball on the bed, her closed fists pressing into her forehead as she strained against her obvious pain. Fuck, I should have been gentler with her.

"Where does it hurt, Jaden?" I asked gently, leaning over her to examine every inch.

Her eyes remained closed as she answered.

"Right where my tattoo is," she gritted, pointing at the feather tattoo on her ribs.

I moved my hands toward her ribs to feel for any tenderness when she protested. "Don't, don't!" she panicked, cringing into herself even more. Fucking hell.

"On a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain?" I asked. I hoped I hadn't fucking broken them more.

"Six," she gritted.

"Jaden," I warned. She was lying. Jaden wouldn't bitch about pain unless it was an eight or above. She wasn't a little bitch like others were.

"Okay, nine," she finally admitted. Not good.

"Is it difficult to breathe?"

"No," she said, biting her lip now. "Just hurts when I do."

"I'll call Sid. Do not move," I said and immediately started dialing.

"Yes?" Sid answered on the first ring.

"Jaden's in pain. Bring your kit, along with her painkillers. Heavy doses," I ordered, my eyes never leaving Jaden.

"On my way," he said, and I hung up, immediately turning my attention back to Jaden.

She was taking slow, shallow breaths through her nose, her eyes were clenched shut, and her knuckles turned white as they rested against her forehead. I looked at the spot where she claimed to feel the pain, looking for discoloration or bruising. She had a few tiny bruises on her hips from my fingertips but nothing noticeable on her rib cage.

I took her small fist from her head and unwrapped her fingers to wrap them around mine. She squeezed them tightly, and she fought to keep her breathing under control. I kissed her fingers, trying to be as gentle as possible.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I shouldn't have been so rough."

She smiled and nearly chuckled. "Stop trying to make me laugh," she replied, her hooded eyes peering up at me. I smiled back as I covered Jaden's body with the bed sheet.

Sid arrived about thirty seconds later, placing his kit on the bed while Ginsby remained concerned as ever at his side.

"Where's the pain?" he asked as he rounded the bed to look Jaden over.

I pulled the side of the sheet to expose just the side of Jaden's rib cage so Sid could get a better look.

"No signs of visible bruising, but it's difficult to tell with the tattoo," he said as he looked her over. But the moment his hands touched her skin and caused Jaden to wince, I had to stop myself from breaking his hands off. He was here to help her, and as long as he remained professional, I could curb my possessive urges. Still, he'd better hurry the fuck up. "You're a little tender, Jaden. How bad does it hurt?" he asked her.

"Nine," she answered through gritted teeth.

"What were you doing?" he asked, his eyes now turning up to me.

“Fucking,” I replied bluntly. Sid turned his eyes back to Jaden, shaking his head in disapproval. He’d actually only approved her for sex yesterday but gentle activity. I had been as gentle as I possibly could for a man who hadn’t fucked his woman in over a month. Jaden was lucky I hadn’t broken her in half.

Pulling out his stethoscope, Sid checked Jaden’s breathing and listened to her heart. Once he determined there were no complications and just swelling, he gave Jaden an injection of her painkillers and packed up.

“Will she be staying with you tonight, then?” Sid asked.

“Yes,” I replied immediately.

He nodded. “The medication will knock her out soon. Be mindful of her breathing patterns.”

“No shit,” I said, escorting him to the door. I’d had broken ribs several times before. This was nothing new to me.

Once Sid and Ginsby were gone, I grabbed my laptop, placed it on the nightstand, and sat in bed next to Jaden. Her eyes were even droopier as she remained curled into herself, clutching the bed sheet to her body. She was breathing normally, though not as deep as I liked. Once I was comfortable, I gently moved Jaden’s body so that her head rested in my lap. She didn’t protest; instead, she almost nuzzled into my thigh, relaxing her body. It must have been the meds.

I reviewed Jaden’s weekly itinerary with my right hand, while my left couldn’t stop playing with her hair. She seemed to like that, almost as much as I did, and it always seemed to calm the both of us down. I loved the softness of it while my little hellcat simply just loved for me to pet her. It wasn’t long before Jaden was asleep in my bed, something that had been missing from my life for over a month.

Now that she was here, like this, freshly fucked and where she belonged, it was time to start integrating her back into my life the way she was supposed to be. Holly would help Jaden with her physical as well as mental limitations, and once she was ready, I’d kick things up a notch. I’d make sure Jaden was even better than her usual self was before her escape.

12

CUPCAKE



Mine.

So fucking mine.

The voice echoed in the background, blackness coating my sight. My body felt heavy, slow, useless. Someone was on top of me, weighing me down, immobilizing me completely. I couldn't even speak.

And then suddenly, there was pleasure. My muscles locking as ecstasy coursed through my veins. But just as I was coming down from the high, I was brought back up by immense pain. My skin was on fire, and my bones felt like they were being crushed.

But then Darren's face suddenly came into view, his hand on my throat as he gripped me tightly. Colors of red dripped behind him like paint... or maybe it was blood. I didn't know. The colors swirled around him, marking him like spray paint.

"If I have to fuck you into submission every day to remind you of your place, then I will gladly do so. You're mine, Jaden. Forever."

I could no longer breathe.

My eyes jolted open while a gasp left my lips as I woke from my dream. Stupid fucking nightmares. I had woken alone, in a bed I was unfamiliar with, in a room unrecognizable to me. My eyelids were heavy, my body sore, and my mouth dry as cotton. I looked down at the tangled satin dark green sheets around me and found the empty side of the bed only slightly warm. I rested my head against the pillow; Darren's scent filled my nose

and caused my heart to flutter with fear and disdain. This must have been his bedroom.

I scanned the room for his presence, but all I found were a few dark wooden dressers, two nightstands, a seating area, a fireplace with a flat screen overhead, and a bookshelf. Pulling the sheet up to my chest to cover my naked body, I listened for sounds until my ears finally caught movement in the bathroom. I briefly thought about sneaking out but then thought better of it. If I wasn't where Darren expected me to be, there would be hell to pay, and it was too early for that shit storm.

So I waited like a good little pet, practiced my breathing and jaw exercises, and stretched my back and sides. I still felt a pain in my side, but nothing some painkillers couldn't fix. I had hoped I might have been able to forget what led to the pain in my side, but the satisfaction still humming through my nerves refused any such thing. It'd been a long time since I had been with Darren like that, and I had forgotten how good it was when I finally gave in—regardless of how much I hated him. I just wished I had a choice in the matter.

A few minutes later, Darren finally exited the bathroom while I was mid-stretch, and his eyes immediately narrowed in on me. He was freshly showered, shaved, and mostly dressed. Black slacks hung off his hips, while a white dress shirt remained completely unbuttoned over his upper body, revealing that sculpted, sexy chest and abdomen of his. After everything that had happened, my four-pack was barely visible, and it pissed me off. I swore I would raise it to a six-pack when I was done with my recovery.

"Morning, princess," Darren said with that sly grin of his as he walked over to me. He had that look in his eyes; that strong possessive look that always made my stomach twist. And then I realized it was the first time he'd woken up with me in his bed. He was always so demanding of me, but it was the littlest things that made him happy.

"Morning," I replied, unable to hide the caution in my voice as I clutched the sheet tighter to me.

"Feeling better?" he asked me as he stopped in front of the bed. I eyed him for a moment before answering. It was his damn fault, anyway.

"Yeah," I replied, rubbing my eyes. "Just need my meds and some caffeine."

"Good," he said, turning away and heading toward the closet. "You've got a busy day with Holly today, so you should probably get moving."

I gave him a tiny salute even though I knew he couldn't see me and leaned around the bed to find my clothes. They weren't in the sheets, and they weren't anywhere near the bed.

"Where are my clothes?" I asked out loud, until my eyes finally came across shreds of light pink across the room. A disappointed breath instantly escaped my nose. Darren then appeared from his closet, his shirt buttoned and a solid dark blue tie on, and handed me a black silk robe.

"Sorry about your dress," he said after handing me the robe.

"No, you're not," I countered, unfolding the giant robe and determining how much it would swallow me.

Darren chuckled. "You're right, I'm not," he admitted as he rummaged through his dresser. I watched him as he placed a dark chrome Rolex on his wrist and grabbed his jacket from the chair. Dropping the sheet, I placed my arms through the sleeves of the robe and stepped out of bed to tie the belt. The silk was soft and cool to the skin. Thankfully, the sleeves only went down to my wrists since they were three-quarter sleeves on Darren, but the end of the robe went down to my ankles where it would probably stop past his knees. Whatever. I was covered. That was all that mattered.

When Darren turned around to face me, his eyes immediately lit up with laughter. I folded my arms and glared at him, but he couldn't stop the chuckle that rolled up his throat.

"Ha-ha, I know, hilarious. Can we move on, please?" I said, rolling my eyes.

Darren laughed. "Okay, come on, cupcake. Let's get you on schedule." He grinned, walking over to me.

"Now, you're adding 'cupcake' to the list? Can we not?" I grimaced.

"Would you prefer strawberry shortcake?" he asked with a wide grin. My eyes lit up.

"Would you prefer to die?!" I shot back at him. I was in no mood for jokes this morning, and I'd heard that one a million times before. Darren returned that dangerous glare of his, lifting an eyebrow, but I was too pissed to care. "Yeah, I went there. Get over it," I snarled and headed for the door.

I knew I wasn't getting away with that. Darren quickly grabbed both my elbows and yanked me back to his chest, holding me in place while his mouth found the side of my neck, his teeth sinking deep into my skin. Pain electrified my skin, and for some reason, it traveled straight to my clit. I gasped, my hands turning into tight fists as Darren bit down, sucking and

gnawing at my skin, setting my clit ablaze. He was going to leave one hell of a mark, and maybe that was his intention. He released my neck with a jerk but kept me tight in his hold while his erection dug into my lower back.

Way to wake him up, Jaden...

Darren's nose trailed up my throat before it rubbed against my ear, continuing that slow torturous tingle against my skin.

"You should know by now," he drawled through gritted teeth, "what that smart mouth of yours does to me. You've been cleared to fuck, Jaden, so unless you want to spend your days bent over every five minutes, I suggest you keep yourself in check. Or I will."

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't breathe, couldn't release the air trapped somewhere in my lungs. I was too fucking turned on to even respond to that threat. Liquid heat began to pool between my legs as fear and lust mixed to create the most poisonous chemical reaction... and that shit raced through my veins like heroin. God, what the fuck was wrong with me?

"Got it, cupcake?" he asked with a jerk.

"Got it," I said with a heavy breath.

"Good girl," he approved and released me before putting his jacket on.
"Now, let's go."

Darren placed his hand on the small of my back and led me out of his bedroom. We walked down a long hallway that led to the wide marble staircase, which I was able to ascend without issue, though it wasn't as quick as I normally could have.

When we arrived at my suite, Hank and Blondie obviously waiting for me, Darren took me in his arms and held me tightly against his chest. He pressed his face into my hair and inhaled, relaxing a little as he did. I liked that I had the power to calm him, something he probably hadn't realized he had given me. I needed to get better at controlling that power more than anything. I preferred him calm... and happy.

He was so warm, sturdy and unimaginably solid. Even with my limp arms around him, it felt like he could withstand anything. Just being so close to him, so swallowed by his presence, I couldn't help but feel considerably small. He'd broken the bones in my body, and I willingly gave that body up to him last night.

And here comes the guilt train...

No, I would not feel guilty for the shit I couldn't control. I needed to numb myself to that emotion. I couldn't feel guilt for the actions that would contribute to my survival... even if it meant the death of others. I wasn't just trying to save myself here. I was trying to eliminate a global threat, and if Darren had thousands in his empire, then thousands would die.

If I wanted to become part of the wolf pack, then I would have to become a wolf, even if I was the runt of the litter. The omega was still valuable so long as they could prove their worth. And I would, starting with Darren. I had to give him my all—no matter how much I hated him, no matter how much it terrified me if the result was anything less than absolute death. I had to end this, and in order to do that, I had to end myself. I had to leave the dead Jaden behind and take flight with a new identity—someone tougher, faster, and smarter. A stronger stomach wouldn't be too bad either.

Eventually, Darren released me and tipped my chin up with his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to look at him. Blue, so much blue, I thought I was swimming in it. Those eyes were something else, something dangerous yet so fucking mesmerizing. One look from him could melt me to the floor or freeze me in place. And I had given him that power. I needed to take it back.

And then he leaned down and kissed me. It was soft, gentle, nothing invasive or possessive. Just sweet simplicity. When he released my lips, he gave me a small smile.

"Have a good day with Holly," he said. "I'll see you at dinner." And then he left me standing at the door with Hank and Blondie.

"Morning," I said to them as Hank opened the door. For some reason, I felt like being nice.

"Good morning, Miss Jaden," Hank said to me. Blondie just nodded his head slightly.

"There you are!" shouted Holly in excitement as she jumped up from the reading nook.

"Hey," I said with a cautious smile as she came over to me. The second my eyes landed on the giant red and purple bruise and butterfly bandage covering the bridge of her nose, I felt like the biggest jackass. "Shit, Holly, I'm so sorry," I said regrettably.

"Oh, it's okay," she said, waving me off with a smile. "I'm a fast healer. It'll be back to normal in no time."

I nodded. "Well, I'm grateful for your optimism."

“Right. Well, come on. We have a busy day ahead of us,” she said brightly.

Oh, the joy...

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13

ROUTINE

For the next week, I spent nearly every waking moment with Holly, except for the occasional mealtime with Darren whenever he had the chance. With Holly's happy-go-lucky attitude, it was hard for me not to punch her in the face again, but I was still grateful for her company. I had to give it to her—she was fantastic at physical therapy. In a week, I had better strength and mobility in my jaw and wrist, and I needed less pain medication for my ribs by the day. I worked my ass off to get there, but Holly really gave me the push I needed.

When we weren't working on my physical therapy, Holly tried to keep me preoccupied with just about everything she could think of. We painted every day after lunch, and though it was mundane and pointless, I did it anyway to make her and Darren happy. I continued to finger paint, preferring to work with my hands instead of the brush. Holly made sure to order paint that was more suitable for my style of painting. The colors of my painting would change from time to time, but they were usually always dark—purples, reds, blues, and a lot of black. Sometimes, I thought I was painting a night sky, but I knew I was only painting the darkness in my head, still trying to find the colors within.

At one point, Holly tried to get me to paint something else—my nails. Ginsby had removed the acrylics a long time ago since no one could maintain them on the island. My nails had remained bare and, to be honest, a little dull. I didn't mind having polish on my nails; I just didn't prefer the extra fake shit.

After lunch, Holly and I sat on the couch in the entertainment room where she put on some lame ass romantic comedy while Hank and Blondie got to stand at the door. Lucky bastards. She then pulled out a huge basket of nail polish and tools. My eyebrows actually shot up. There must have been a hundred colors.

“I thought we could paint our nails and watch a movie while they dry,” she practically beamed.

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?” Not like I had anything better to do.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had painted my nails, but apparently, I still had some skill. I managed not to get a single drop of the light pink polish on my skin and even successfully created the perfect striped accent nail on my ring fingers with some silver nail tape. I was a little impressed with myself. Holly, on the other hand, was skilled in getting more polish on her skin than her actual nails.

I shook my head at her as she painted on her third uneven coat, and it was driving me nuts.

“Holly, stop,” I said and inched closer to her. “You have to paint slowly and gently. Otherwise, it will dry unevenly. Watch how I do it.”

I took her brush from her hand, dipped it back into the bottle, and easily laid a perfect coat over her pinky fingernail without adding to the dried polish on her skin.

“See?”

“Wow, that looks great,” she beamed, her eyes examining her hand. “Hey, maybe you could do the rest!” she suggested.

I pursed my lips. Dammit, how did I get sucked into that?

“Sure, but I’ll have to start over. No offense but your base coat looks like shit.”

Son of a fuck, was I really talking about nail polish right now? Ugh!

As I removed the shitty coats of polish from her nails, I found myself getting more and more irritated with the stupid romantic comedy that Holly kept laughing at.

“Okay. I’m sorry, but I can’t take this anymore,” I said, reaching for the remote and searching through the TV options for the sports channel. “If you really want to pique my entertainment, you’ve got to walk in my neighborhood.”

Eventually, I finally found what I was looking for—UFC title fights. Holly gasped.

“You enjoy this barbaric nonsense?” Holly asked in shock. I laughed.

“It’s not barbaric, Holly. It’s a competitive sport. It’s not like they’re gladiators who are forced to fight, you know.”

“Yeah, but it’s just so... dangerous.” She wore a look of near disgust on her face.

“So is driving. Imagine if you had a skill, Holly, something you were really good at, but you had no way of really putting that skill to use, no way to really benefit from it unless certain circumstances finally presented themselves. That’s how it is for these fighters. They have so much skill, but no one to use it on unless someone attacks them. The cage is their way of proving to themselves that their talents are worth something.”

“Hmmm...” murmured Holly. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Exactly, now watch because this shit... is awesome.”



What a fucking day. After re-negotiating two shipment contracts with the Cubans and a heated debate with the Jamaicans about the best water routes to take for drop-offs, I’d had more than enough bullshit for the day. At least our profits had been through the roof for this past month thanks to the nice little report I got from Ron this morning. I was on my way to my office when I heard female shouting coming from the entertainment room.

“Hit ‘em! Hit ‘em! What the hell are you doing?! Move!” I heard Jaden’s voice loud and clear and headed over to the entertainment room to find out what she was doing. I found Hank and Preston standing beside the doorway watching Jaden cheer on some MMA match on TV.

“What the fuck is she watching?” I asked Hank.

Hank cleared his throat nervously. “Uh, UFC, sir,” he said with a nod. I almost laughed.

“Watch, watch, watch,” Jaden said to Holly as she pointed at the TV. “Watch this kick... boom! Now, that’s talent. Tornado kicks are tough to pull off in the octagon.”

“Wow, you seem to know an awful lot about this stuff,” beamed Holly.

Jaden shrugged, her focus moving to Holly’s hand as she began painting what looked like a second coat onto her nails. I thought I was hallucinating for a second. Was Jaden actually painting another girl’s nails?

“Having fun in here?” I asked aloud as I rounded the couch. Both their eyes snapped up to me in surprise at the announcement of my arrival.

“Mr. Davis,” Holly piped up, while Jaden eyes remained on me as I moved to sit down next to her. “Yes, Jaden and I were just watching some old UFC title fights.”

“Really,” I said, my eyes never leaving Jaden’s. “And are you enjoying the fights?”

“Oh, yes. Very interesting,” Holly replied, that stupid smile never leaving her face. “Jaden’s been explaining all the rules of the sport and the moves and techniques of the fighters. She knows her stuff,” she said proudly.

I smirked. She had better know her stuff.

When Jaden made no comment, I looked down at her hands to notice the bright light pink color she had chosen for herself.

“Pink?” I asked her with a soft smile.

She gave me a smirk. “You’re welcome.”

Well, now that was surprising.

“I like it. You were right in your ability to do your own nails.”

“I still like Anya and Irina,” she said quickly, her eyes turning up to mine, big and hopeful. “I can’t do the acrylics like they can.”

I sneered at her. “Worried they might lose their value?”

Jaden formed her mouth into a tight line as she clenched her jaw. “Yes,” she said sharply, glaring at me. So fucking cute.

I folded my arms and leaned back on the couch, watching her with a smile. “Don’t worry, Jaden. I have a feeling they’ll be around for a long time as long as the rules are followed.”

“They will be,” she said softly as she proceeded to paint a clear polish over Holly’s nails. Her focus was sharp as she slowly dragged the brush down each nail, her precision honestly impressive.

There was no fire today, though. For the last week, Jaden had been nothing but quiet, cooperative, and complacent. She’d been working with Holly without complaint, didn’t trouble her bodyguards, and was even less argumentative with me. Though, from the security feeds around the house, I could still tell how annoyed she was with some of the things that came out of Holly’s mouth. Unfortunately, Holly wasn’t exactly the brightest crayon in the box, another reason she was perfect for this job. She was none the

wiser when it came to how easily it was to manipulate her. Too gullible, too goddamn innocent, and fucking annoying.

Her only redeeming quality was that Jaden was ten times better than she was two weeks ago. Something had changed, and I didn't know if it was Holly or something else entirely. For once, Jaden finally seemed focused on getting herself back together, which gave me even more hope that she was still perfect for me. I didn't want someone who could just hit hard; she had to be able to take the hits and keep going. But I had to give her a reason to keep going.

I stayed and watched some of the fights with Jaden and Holly before I had to step away to take a phone call. Jaden was quiet at first as she watched each match, but as Holly became more vocal, so did Jaden. Her commentary was interesting, only because Holly asked so many damn questions—what she thought of each fighter, their fighting style, their record, and their strengths and weaknesses. Jaden could see it all, and I couldn't help but find myself appreciative of her insightfulness. It made her that much more desirable.

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14

REMEMBER



“That’s it, Jaden. Just five more. Come on, push it.”

Sweat dripped down my face as I pushed for the last set of thirty inverted sit-ups. Holly and I had been working on my physical therapy in Darren’s gym for the last hour, and I made damn sure she challenged me at every angle.

After I was finished with the set, I grabbed the metal bar I was hanging upside down from and flipped myself over, landing perfectly on the floor. It had been another two weeks, and I was feeling stronger than ever. My muscle mass had grown, my four-pack finally visible again, and I was feeling better than ever. I’d even somehow managed to stay on Darren’s good side due to my lack of attitude. Since I was getting better, exercising, and breaking past my limits, I was happier. I still wasn’t back to my old 100 percent, though. A few things were missing.

When Holly and I were finished, I couldn’t help but stare longingly at the heavy bags on the other side of the room. I could almost hear them begging me to lay into them... and I wanted to really badly. Tentatively, I walked over to the bag and threw a reverse sidekick, landing it perfectly and sending the bag back a good few feet.

“Holy shit!” Holly cried out in excitement. “How did you do that? That was so cool!”

I grimaced. “It was slow.”

“Are you kidding me? If I’d have blinked, I would have missed it!”

“You would have missed it even if you hadn’t,” I replied. That’s how fast I was supposed to be. Fuck, I had so much work to do.

“I knew it! You *are* some kind of fighter, aren’t you?”

I scoffed. “Was,” I said blankly, walking away from the bag.

“What do you mean ‘was’?”

“I don’t exactly practice anymore.”

“Well, what’s stopping you?” she asked me.

I fucking straight up laughed. About a million things were stopping me, but I couldn’t tell Holly that. So, I lied somewhat.

“Injuries, plus I don’t have any of my gear,” I replied with a shrug.

“Well, maybe we can get Mr. Davis to get you your gear.”

I chuckled again. “Good luck with that.”

“Why? You don’t think he would?”

“I’d be very surprised if he did.”

Holly suddenly squared her shoulders, wearing a big smile on her face.

“I’ll talk to him. I’ll convince him it’s part of your therapy.”

“Don’t lie to him, Holly. It’s not a good idea,” I warned.

“It’s not a lie,” she said reassuringly. “I really do want to incorporate it into your therapy. I think it’ll be really good for you.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” She smiled. “Now, let’s go for a swim.”

I doubted Holly would be able to crack Darren. I doubted he wanted me in fighting condition ever again. He might want me strong and durable, but that didn’t mean I could throw kicks at his head anymore. I wouldn’t be fighting him anytime soon—at least not hand-to-hand combat. I’d have to find some kind of advantage over him, but first, I needed to get him to let his guard down around me. In order to do that, I had to stop fighting him.

But sure to Holly’s word and much to my shock and confusion, there was a pair of hot pink boxing gloves with gold tiara prints on them, pink wraps, and my old iPod sitting on the leather couch in the gym. I rolled my eyes at the color and pattern of the gloves, but I could deal with it. At least, I finally had a pair!

Holly was beyond excited for some reason. She said she couldn’t wait to see me in action and see what I could do. As I wrapped my hands and wrists, Holly hooked up her phone to the stereo system and started playing “Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor. She turned around and practically beamed like it was the best idea she’d ever had. I rolled my eyes. What the fuck did

she think this was, a Rocky movie? As soon as I was done with the wraps, I marched over and shut the song off midway through the opening guitar solo.

“I fucking hate this song.” It was overplayed and overrated.

I switched Holly’s phone out for my iPod and put on the song I was dying to hear—“Break Stuff” by Limp Bizkit. As soon as the sound made its way to my ears, I was ready for breakage. I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders as I strapped on my gloves and made my way over to the bags. I got light on my feet, keeping my knees bent and my weight steady. I breathed easy, my gloved hands at face level, and focused my sights on my target. And with one deep breath, I moved for destruction.

Hooks, jabs, crosses, uppercuts, elbows, kicks, knees—you name it, I did it. I tore into the bag like there was no tomorrow. Sweat dripped from my brow in a matter of minutes while my heart force-fed adrenaline through my veins. The bag flew in a manner of all different directions, each attack stronger than the last until I could no longer catch my breath. I tore myself away and gradually paced in front of the bag like some kind of animal stalking its prey. My conditioning was for shit, but I would fix that in a matter of days.

When I was finally calm enough, I went back for more. I must have hit the bag for thirty minutes straight before I finally collapsed on the floor in a sweaty, exhausted mess. Nearly all of my attacks were twenty-five percent less capacity of what I was capable of. My kicks were slower and lacked my usual finesse, and my punches didn’t have anywhere near the same power I knew I could bring. I had so much work to do, but apparently, I had all the time in the world since I technically controlled when we were leaving the island.

For the rest of the month, Holly and I worked habitually on the bags, lifting weights, stretching, and making me as strong as humanly possible. Darren was certainly enjoying the results because I wasn’t just letting him fuck me anymore—I was fucking him back. When I could forget the fact that his men were currently hunting down the love of my life, my mom, and my brothers, and when he wasn’t a total controlling douchebag, he was almost tolerable.

He didn’t push me on my emotional detachment or my ever-growing desensitization to the prospect of death. Though I wouldn’t consider myself the chattiest with him, I tried to keep things light and civil, and it seemed he

was on the same page as I was. Darren actually tried to spend as much time with me as he could, almost as if he was trying to get our “relationship” back on track. He was attentive, affectionate, and surprisingly sweet, though he would never let me escape the reminders that he was in control. I knew what I was giving up the moment I pushed that makeshift Molotov cocktail off the ledge of that window, and I was slowly coming to terms with those consequences. Even though Darren controlled every aspect of my life, at least I could finally control my bodily movements.

I could feel my depression leaving me now that my body was back in shape. I had stretched myself back to the limber noodle I was, finally completing a no handed cartwheel, my scorpion kick, and my butterfly kicks. I was nearly ready to leave the island; I was so confident. But for some reason, Darren seemed to want to test me further.

One day after warming up on the bag, Scott randomly walked into the gym wearing black sweatpants, running shoes, and a black t-shirt. I hadn’t seen him since he’d first left with Darren before I had escaped. I’d completely forgotten all about him, and I had no idea why he was suddenly in the gym and walking toward me with an angry look on his face. He strolled right past me for the shelves of fighting equipment and grabbed two focus mitts.

“Come on,” he said, passing me. “You’re working with me.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. Holly looked just as confused as I did.

“Darren wants me to train you to make sure you’re ready. Got a problem with that?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “He didn’t say anything to me about this.”

“That’s because he just decided it five minutes ago.”

Motherfucker was watching me again—was probably watching right now.

“Okay,” I said, eyeing him. “Whatcha got?”

He held up the mitts. “Left, right, hook, uppercut, hook, duck, uppercut.”

Holly stood there confused, as if Scott was speaking a second language, but I knew exactly what he’d just said. “All right.”

I landed the first five strikes but wasn’t fast enough for the duck before I threw the last uppercut. My lips formed into a tight line as I stared Scott down. He smirked back.

Okay, motherfucker. Game on.

Over and over, I repeated the same set but could not manage to duck his strike before the uppercut. It was frustrating as hell. I knew I was fast, but fuck, he was faster. Just as fast as Darren. Eventually, we changed up the set, switching the strikes for elbows or kicks, and I found myself fighting just to remain standing; I was that exhausted. When we were finally done, it took everything I had not to collapse on the floor in front of him.

“We’ll pick this up again tomorrow,” he said and walked out of the gym.

“Can’t wait!” I shouted after him and proceeded to chug the rest of my water bottle.

“Holy shit, Jaden! You did so well! I’m super impressed!” Holly beamed.

“Thanks. I think I’d like to go to sleep for the rest of my life now.”

She giggled. “You can’t do that. Not with Thanksgiving right around the corner!”

I stopped mid swig of my water and eyed her like she was a ghost or something.

“I’m sorry. Did you say Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah, it’s tomorrow, silly. Did you forget?”

I felt my heart fall into my stomach. “I, uh, I guess I did.” My brothers’ birthdays had already passed, and I hadn’t even noticed it. They were only two years apart from each other. With October now gone and past, Aaron was officially seventeen and Brennan was fifteen. I suddenly felt my heart breaking all over again because, in Darren’s eye, I would never see them again. I would never again see my own fucking family.

“Hey, are you okay, Jaden?”

I sniffed back the sorrow that threatened to take me over. I couldn’t believe it was already the end of November.

“What are you still doing here then? Shouldn’t you be going home to see your family?”

She shrugged, a sad smile curving across her face. “I don’t really have anyone to visit. My parents died in a car accident, too. A long time ago.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at the floor, suddenly embarrassed. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. It happened when I was five. I barely remember them.”

I nodded. Maybe that made it better somehow. She didn’t really know who she was missing.

"Still, you must have someone you should be visiting on holidays," I said. "You shouldn't have to stay here with me."

Holly shrugged. "My parents didn't have brothers or sisters, and I'm an only child. Grandparents are gone, too."

"Jesus, Holly," I said shocked. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. It's why I stay busy. I'm only twenty-two, and I'm already a certified personal trainer and physical therapist, who's well on her way to becoming a doctor debt free," she said with a wink.

I shook my head, unable to hide the smirk forming on my lips. "I love your optimism, Holly."

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "You should try it sometime."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

Holly considered me for a moment, something lingering on her mind, and I could tell she was afraid to speak it.

"What?" I asked.

"You know, Jaden. I know we're not supposed to discuss it, but sometimes talking about traumatic experiences can—"

"Don't," I said sharply and turned away from her to remove my gloves and wraps. This was not a topic to dwell on, especially when that topic was a lie.

"Jaden," she started softly, "I know this is tough for you, but—"

I got up real close to her face, enough so that my mouth was right at her ear. "If there is one thing you should be aware of around here, it's that there are consequences for broken rules. Please don't break them."

Holly stood very still for a moment before she finally released a quick breath and nodded. I didn't like it, but she needed the warning. Better it come from me than Darren.

"Come on, let's go swimming. I think I need to float in the pool for a while," I said.

Holly nodded, a fake smile appearing on her lips as she followed me out of the gym.

For the rest of the day, all I could think about was time. I had already been on the island for two months and hadn't even realized it. Darren had officially stolen five months of my life—five months I would never get back. But it was only still the beginning of my captivity. I would have to expect to unwillingly give a few years of my life to my plan of destruction. I had so much more to accomplish first. I couldn't just kill Darren. Not

without signaling my own death wish. I had to bring his resources down first. And I had no fucking clue how I was going to do that. Suddenly, I felt depressed again.

Tomorrow, I should sit at a table with my family, about to eat my body weight in turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes. Instead, I didn't even know what I would be doing for dinner tomorrow. If I'd be eating alone in my suite or at the dinner table with Darren. Again with the reminder that my life was not mine to control. It was Darren's, and as I floated along in my inflatable chair in Darren's pool, staring up at the sunny sky, I felt all the hope drain out of me again. Reality was always there to slap the shit out of me, or maybe it was just Darren when I finally pushed him over the edge. My monster among them all.

When dinner finally came, I felt like I was on autopilot, too concerned with the passing seconds that would never stop. The same seconds that pulled me further and further away from my family. I could feel Darren's eyes on me, watching me with that concerned, angry look on his face. He'd asked me how my first day of training with Scott went. I'd barely answered, shrugging it off with a fine and that I would master his duck tomorrow. Normally, I would have asked him why he suddenly decided to have him train me, but again, autopilot.

"You're awfully quiet this evening," Darren pointed out.

I shrugged again, looking down at my barely touched plate. "Not much to say today."

"Bullshit," he countered. "Something's on your mind. What is it?"

I exhaled a deep breath. "For once, Darren, I don't want to fight, so can we just leave it alone?"

"And allow you to sit there and sulk? I don't think so. Out with it," he ordered.

I huffed and crossed my arms across my chest. "Fine. Is it really Thanksgiving tomorrow?"

Darren raised his eyebrows in surprise as if it were the stupidest thing to be concerned about.

"That's what has you so upset? A stupid holiday?"

It was a miracle I didn't roll my eyes. "Hey, you asked, remember?"

"Yes, I did. Now, why are you asking? And who told you that it was?"

I gulped, not wanting to give Holly away. "There is a calendar on my iPod, you know. And I'm asking because I was wondering if there was

anything planned for tomorrow or if you'd be gone all day again.”

Darren clenched his jaw at my question. I wondered if he even remembered that tomorrow was Thanksgiving. Did he even celebrate holidays?

“No, Jaden. Nothing was planned. I have to leave the island tonight for a couple of days. Holidays are not given much thought in my world.”

“Okay,” I said quietly with a nod, trying to hide my sniffling. Why was I so upset over this? There was no one to celebrate with anyway.

“But if it's so important to you, maybe I can have the staff set up something.”

I shook my head. “It's not. Holidays are for families, and I don't have that anymore, so just... forget it.”

I winced as Darren abruptly stood from the table and hauled me up from my chair.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean that,” I said quickly, fear now racing through my veins. I was fully recovered now, which meant Darren could hurt me again if he wanted to. And he was not one to be shy about it. But all he did was crush me to his chest in a tight bear-like hug while he sighed heavily. I tried not to tremble, afraid he might squeeze too hard if I moved. Instead, I rested my hands limply on his hips and waited. He was breathing heavy but didn't say anything for a few seconds, and I wished he had remained silent.

“Jaden, you will never see your family again and to think otherwise will only bring you pain. Let them go, or I will do it for you.”

I shuddered because I recognized the brutal truth of his words, the lingering threat that reminded me that my family should be as dead to me as I was to them. And the truth fucking hurt. I felt the world close in on me, felt the weight of the tears that promised to fall if I didn't shape the fuck up. Darren knew where they all were, and he would kill them for my compliance.

“I know,” I said blankly. “But I doubt you'd give up your brothers just as easily.”

I was bold enough to stare up at him after that statement.

Darren wrapped his hands around my face, pulling me toward him and keeping me in place. That intense stare of his pierced through me, sending wave after wave of ice up my spine.

“You are not me,” he said with a disapproving tone. “Stop trying to compare in hopes I will sympathize. I won't. You are never to bring them

up again without my prompt. Do so, and I will gladly have one eliminated every day until you understand that the only family you have now is me.”

My breath caught in my throat as the tears pooled in my eyes. “You say the sweetest things,” I replied, my voice raspy and broken.

“Don’t I always,” he answered and lowered his face to mine.

Suddenly, I forgot about my need to breathe. His lips melted onto my mine, soft yet domineering as ever. But as the kiss took form, it was just the push my tears needed to go right over the edge. They fell down my face, trickling through Darren’s fingers and wetting my skin. I felt my blood rush as Darren’s lips forced my mouth open wider, allowing his tongue to enter and conquer. By the time he was finished, I was hot all over and angry as hell.

That night, Darren fucked me mercilessly for hours, reminding me that I was his by biting into the tattoos of his name on my wrists so I would feel them later. But I made sure to bite back. I left teeth marks on his shoulder, scratch marks down his back, and even a few tiny bruises on his forearms from my grip. I hate fucked him so hard; even I’d be feeling it for days.

When I woke up again, it was still dark, but the light of a small lamp allowed me to find Darren packing a bag at his dresser. His broad, jacket-covered back faced me, but I still managed to see that he wasn’t just packing the bag with clothes, he was packing guns—lots of guns. I laid there on my stomach under the soft sheets, my arms stretched out under the pillow while I watched Darren through half hooded, tired lids. His movements were quick, sharp, and determined. He knew exactly what he was doing, knowing exactly what he needed. I wondered what came of this and where he was going.

“Go back to sleep, princess,” he said to me without turning around as he continued to load several mags of ammunition into the side pockets of his bag. Once I focused on them, I realized they weren’t just for pistols; there was automatic ammunition going into those pockets. What the fuck was he up to?

“How did you know I was awake?” I asked through a yawn. I could have rolled over and easily fallen back asleep, but I wanted to know what was going on.

“I heard the change in your breathing pattern. Now, go back to sleep.”

“Where are you going now?” I asked sleepily, ignoring his order for the second time.

Darren sighed in annoyance. “You know I won’t answer that,” he replied and zipped up the bag.

I rolled over and pulled the sheet up to my shoulder. “Obviously some place where automatic weapons will be needed,” I replied, closing my eyes. “I’d wish you luck, but...”

But I’m hoping you’ll end up eating all those bullets for breakfast.

“You probably should,” he replied casually as he dropped his bag off at the door. “Have you never wondered what would happen to you should I ever perish?”

Now, this piqued my interest. I had thought about it many times, but I figured if he was dead and it was obviously not my doing, it would be easier for me to escape. His empire and brothers would likely be too busy trying to take control and avenge him to care about me, and I’d be long gone before they even remembered my name. Hopefully.

“I guess that would depend on how you died, and whether your organization thought I did it,” I said slyly. “But either way, I doubt I’d be kept around for long.”

I could hear his smile long before I even saw it. I felt Darren’s large hands grip my ankles and tug me to him toward the end of the bed, allowing him to lean over me. He placed his hands on either side of my head, so all I could see was the sinister look on his face. I guess we weren’t laughing anymore because my stomach immediately shriveled up in knots.

“You will be well cared for, Jaden. If by some miracle, some lucky bastard was able to take me down, you will be looked after for the rest of your life. But if you continue to push, if you continue to misbehave and cause trouble for my brothers, you will find your life with me was much happier in comparison to the confinement they will subject you to. Understand?”

I furrowed my brows in suspicion. “You expect me to trust that? How do you know they won’t go against your wishes and kill me? Or worse, sell me off?”

“Because if anything happens to them, I will honor their final wishes just the same. My middle brother and his wife are about to have their first child in the next couple of months, and if something were to happen to him, he has my word that his family will be well cared for in his absence. Just as they will honor me and do the same for you. That is our code. ‘Honor the dead by way of the living.’”

What the hell did he know of honor? He'd certainly taken mine and made it his to defend, but where did he get the nerve to say there was honor in his lifestyle? Nothing was honorable about the way he killed people, about the way he used them, sold them... fucked them. He was a monster and monsters had no honor.

"Couldn't you just let me go?" I asked softly. "If you're gone, there's no need for me to be here anymore. I'd just be an inconvenience for everyone else."

Darren rose from my body, his jaw clenched and his eyes intense as he scowled down at me. "No, Jaden. The moment you're free, you'd go running to the authorities, and I won't have you putting my organization or my family in jeopardy," he said sharply. And then his eyes settled on the amber of mine, a slow devious smile curving at his lips, and I felt a twinge of despair run through me "Even in death, princess, you will always belong to me."

Even in death, you will always belong to me...

I felt my heart give out.

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15

TRAITOR



After fucking Jaden one last time, I finally left her in my bed to sleep off her exhaustion. I grabbed my bag and left Hank and Preston to wait by the door for Jaden to wake. Scott met up with me in the hallway, carrying his own black bag full of automatic guns and ammunition. Someone had attacked one of my warehouses in Florida last night and left the biggest fucking calling card imaginable.

Apparently, Boris Weldimer, the fat fuck who blabbed about my lovely redhead purchase at the auction, had a twenty-three-year-old son, Edmund, and he obviously didn't like the fact that I'd beaten his father into a vegetative coma a few months ago. Boris had it coming, though. He'd been talking a lot of shit lately, blabbing secrets and starting shit with other syndicates. And now, it looked like his meddling son wanted some attention. Granted.

The only issue was that the warehouse he'd hit was well hidden within my organization, and the only way that little fucker could have found the location was if someone on my side had given it up. A snitch existed somewhere within my ranks, and I was going to find him and gut him for the rest to see. I fucking hated rats.

At four a.m., Scott and I wordlessly boarded the plane, sitting at opposite ends, and discussed the strategy for the thirtieth fucking time. Boris owned a string of strip clubs, all the while hosting private poker parties in the back, a setup I had secured for him a long ass time ago.

Triguard had been receiving ten percent of their profits for my investment, and now, it looked like our contract was going to require a little... tweaking.

Edmund Weldimer lived alone in his father's house in Naples, Florida, and though the mansion was guarded well throughout all hours of the day, Weldimer's security had nothing on my men. It would be as easy as popping balloons on a dartboard. And then I was going to show the little prick what happened when you fucked with Darren Davis.

When the plane landed, Scott and I exited; we swung our bags over our shoulders as a black van pulled up. The two in the front got out, trading Scott for the driver's side and me in the passenger seat. The two got in the back with the remaining two already there and slid the door shut. Four of my best men sat calmly in the backseat, dressed in black and combat gear, ready for anything. They had already been scouting the place for a few days, counting ten armed men on the grounds and five inside the house. I rolled my shoulders in anticipation. This was going to be fun.

As we drove, images of Jaden's beautiful naked body kept plaguing my mind. Wrapped in those silky dark green sheets—which emphasized the creaminess of her skin and the lush red in her hair—it just made me want to crawl back in and lose myself with her all over again. I could kick the shit out of myself for hurting her the way I had. I would never deprive myself of her body again.

About an hour later, Scott finally pulled the car off on a dirt road and parked us well hidden in the trees. All six of us exited the vehicle and began to load up. After strapping on black Kevlar vests, we equipped ourselves with as much ammunition and as many firearms as possible. I checked every one of my guns, making sure a bullet was in each chamber and adjusting my silencers before sliding them back into their holsters. A knife was also in each one of my boots and one at my hip. After checking the connection on our earpiece headsets, we were finally ready to roll.

“Let’s go,” I said, my voice unable to hide my excitement.

It was still dark out as we silently headed through the trees, but dawn would be approaching soon, and I wanted this to be over by the time the sun hit the house.

As we breached the perimeter of the property, we scanned the area for the ten men patrolling the grounds. The property was wide open with the massive brick mansion in the back. Four men were up toward the front of

the house, four in the back, and one on either side of the property. Piece of cake. On a silent nod, I gave the order for my men to split up while Scott and I headed for the house.

In a matter of seconds, all the black walking dots dropped to the ground without so much as a sound. Aiden and Calvin were my best snipers, and this was exactly why. On high alert, Scott and I quickly took care of the remaining few stragglers as we hurried through the grounds with a clean sweep. A few short minutes later, the three of my men regrouped while the fourth watched from a distance to see into the house and keep us covered.

“How we doin’ Aiden?” I said into my mouthpiece.

“All clear from here,” he replied.

“Good. Let’s move,” I ordered.

We circled around the house to the back entrance, slipping through the door undetected. My senses ran amuck as I listened for footsteps and watched for movement. Nothing. Silently making our way through the house, it didn’t take long before a barrage of loud footsteps came running down the stairs.

Automatic rifles in hand, we rounded the corner and unloaded into the three advancing men. The sound of gunfire breached the air while my blood rushed with excitement as we watched Weldimer’s men tumble down the steps in a bloody mess.

We began to make our way to the stairs when the sounds of claws against hardwood broke the silence. Barking and snarling, five large Doberman pinchers ran in our direction, hungry for blood. Raising our rifles, we fired into the quickly proceeding pack, but two of the five managed to make it past the gunfire. The biggest one in the pack had already launched himself at me, his teeth ripping into my forearm before I had a chance to reload my gun. Pain seared into my arm while I grabbed my pistol and put two in the big fucker’s chest. I dropped him with a loud squeal, while Scott put the other one down.

“Kid’s held up in the master suite, last door on your right, two armed guards left, but I don’t have a clean shot,” said Aiden through the headset.

“Got it. Heading up there now,” I replied, heading for the stairs, my men in tow.

Blood was seeping through my sleeve, but I ignored it as I clutched my rifle, keeping it tight against my shoulder as we maneuvered over the mess of bodies on the stairs. Once at the top, I immediately scanned the hallway

for threats knowing full well this kid's security measures were for shit. But the sound of glass breaking and a loud thump against the floor confirmed Aiden's kill.

"One down," he said as the sound of return fire from the window ensued. Fucking idiots.

My head ran thick with anticipation as we quickly made our way to the door of the master suite, guns at the ready. Raising my foot, I kicked the door clean off its hinges and immediately fired at the remaining guard crouched by the window. He dropped instantly.

Scott was already moving in on Weldimer, narrowly shooting his gun out of his hand with a single shot. Panic washed over his pale, sweaty face, and then he did something even more stupid. He fucking ran. I didn't want him dead, so I grabbed the nearest thing to me, which happened to be a small chair, and hurled it at his back, causing him to collapse to the floor in a heap.

My men quickly circled him, the muzzles of their guns pointing directly at him while he fucking cowered on the floor. Shaking like a leaf, he raised his hands to his head in surrender, staring up at me with fear bleeding from his eyes. I smirked.

"Hello, Edmund," I sneered.

Edmund's chest rose and fell at an alarming rate, his eyes wide with fear as he stared up at me from the floor. His blond hair was dirty and disheveled as he shivered in his worn sweatpants and food-stained t-shirt.

"Look, man, I don't know what this is about, but you've got—"

"Shut the fuck up, Edmund." I growled. "What? You thought you could just attack one of my warehouses, and I wouldn't find out about it?"

"I-I don't know what you're t-talking about, man," he stuttered.

"Oh, I think you do. You see," I said, pulling out the stupid red bandana that contained his little gang's symbol and tossed it at him, "one of your guys was kind enough to leave this behind. I thought you might want it back."

Edmund positively went green. His shit brown eyes lingered on the bandana while sweat dripped down the sides of his stubbly unkempt face.

Finally, he gained some courage to speak. "Look, I never gave them the order to do that. They must have—"

My fist had collided with his jaw before he had a chance to finish his lie.

“You spit one more lie to me and I’ll cut your fucking tongue out. There are cameras in all of my warehouses, you little shit, and I have a nice screenshot of your fucking face smiling while you killed three of my men and stole over half a million dollars of my drugs.”

Blood seeped from the side of Edmund’s lip where his teeth had cut into them, and it made me want to keep hitting him so there would be more. Edmund had slumped over onto the floor, unable to hold himself up, until Calvin grabbed him by the shirt to lift him back to his knees.

“Now, I’ve just eliminated your little security fleet with only five of my men. Fucking with me is not wise. So here’s how this is going to go. You’re going to give me the name of the traitorous fuck who gave you the location of that warehouse, and in return, I might only chop off one of your thieving hands.”

Edmund’s eyes went wide with fear as he slowly began to hyperventilate.

“Breathe, Edmund. All I want is a name. If it’s a full name, I might just forgive you altogether.”

“I... I... I don’t,” he started, licking his dry lips as he attempted to think. “I think...”

“Think carefully before you lie to me, Edmund,” I warned. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. It’s up to you.”

“I... I don’t r-remember,” he stuttered again.

I shook my head. “Hard way, it is.”

I nodded at Scott, who knelt down, took Edmund’s loose arm, and snapped it behind his back in an extremely awkward and painful angle. Edmund screamed and struggled against Scott. He was such a baby. This was nothing compared to what I was really going to do.

“Give me a name, Edmund,” I ordered.

“He... he didn’t give me a name. He just called me from a blocked line and gave me the info. Ah! Said one of his guys would meet me there to grab their cut. I never saw his face.” Scott twisted his arm further when he went silent. “Ah! No names! That’s it, I swear!”

I sighed in disappointment and shook my head. My snitch was smarter than I was hoping.

“Okay, Edmund, I believe you. Now, listen carefully because this next part is very important.”

He nodded quickly. Taking several deep breaths, he thought he was in the clear. I almost started to laugh.

“In the next twenty-four hours, you’re going to return everything you stole from my warehouse, plus the extra one hundred thousand dollars you cost me for the inconvenience of having to come out here and deal with you myself. And as a reminder of your newfound loyalty, your clubs will now be turning over twenty percent of its profits to my company, effective tomorrow morning.”

The little fucker just gaped at me, too fear stricken to reply.

“Questions?” I asked, raising my brows in enthusiasm.

Wide-eyed and shivering, he shook his head.

“Good. Now, if none of which I just told you is accomplished within the specified time, you and your little gang of toddlers will find yourselves in pieces at the bottom of the ocean. Understand?”

He nodded.

“Say you understand.” I growled at him.

“I-I understand,” he whimpered.

I relaxed, my smirk returning to my face. We still weren’t done.

“Good. Now to seal the deal.”

Reaching down, I grabbed the little shit by his scrawny neck and dragged him over to the gas fireplace. Scott turned it on and placed the ash shovel inside while I pulled out my hunting knife, and pushed Edmund down to the floor. Pressing my knee into his spine so that he remained flat on his belly, I splayed his right arm out in front of him so he would have a good view of his hand.

“Oh, God, man, please don’t!” he cried as he struggled underneath me.
“Please! I’m sorry!”

“Remember what I said by ‘pieces’?” I sneered into his ear.

“Fuck! NO! Come on, man! Please!”

And then, one by one, I cut off each one of his fingers, his blood-curdling screams only encouraging me as I sawed away through the fragile bones.

“Stop! Oh, fuck, please! Please! Stop!” he screamed.

Edmund writhed and cried, his body flailing under me in an attempt to get away, but there was nowhere for him to go. When I was finished, and the only remaining digit was his thumb, I nodded for Scott to grab the now bright orange metal shovel from the fire. Blood pooled all over the floor

while Edmund cried and shook with fear as Scott brought the shovel over to his bleeding hand. As I held his wrist down, Scott placed the flat part of the metal shovel against Edmund's bleeding nubs. The room immediately filled with Edmund's screams as the hot metal seared into his flesh, cauterizing the wounds. By the time Scott was done, the smell of burning flesh had lingered throughout the room. But I didn't want the fucker bleeding out on me, and I certainly didn't want to leave him with the option to potentially reattach his fingers.

"Sorry, you'll have to jack off with the left hand from now on." I snickered into his ear. "Now, if I ever have any more trouble from you or any of your little shit-head friends, I'll come back here and finish what I started." I flicked his injured hand for emphasis, and he howled. "Got it?"

"Yes!" he nearly screamed.

"Good," I said enthused as I stood up. "Then we're done here."

Heading for the door, we left Edmund in a bloodied mess as he curled his now mutilated hand into himself. But the moment I reached the door, I remembered something important.

"Oh, and Edmund," I said, turning on a smile. He looked over at me with more fear than I thought possible. "Happy Thanksgiving."

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16

THANKFUL



I woke up feeling like total shit. After Darren had left, I twisted myself back into the silk sheets, but the sound of his ownership kept ringing in my ears.

Even in death, you will always belong to me.

At least if he were dead, I could finally enjoy a life of celibacy.

After twisting and turning for several hours, wondering where he was and who he was killing, I finally gave up and went for a shower. As I washed, I contemplated the idea of escape if Darren were ever killed. I knew he lived a dangerous life, one where death was constantly knocking at his door, but he probably had that bitch in his pocket, too. I'd really only had a glimpse of what Darren was capable of, how cruel he could be, and I knew eventually the rest of that veil would fall, and I'd see the demon I knew he was. Yet I wanted to cling to the man—the one who could be tender and caring, and the one who could make my body erupt with volcanic sexual bliss. I'd rather deal with him than the demanding bloodthirsty crime lord any day.

Listening to him mention that his brother was about to have a baby with his wife weirded me out. The idea of bringing a child into this life sickened me. This was no place for something so innocent. But what was even more unsettling was the fact that Darren was going to be an uncle. To think of him as any kind of family man felt out of place and unrealistic. I didn't exactly see him as the nurturing loving type, but hey, Darren was full of surprises.

After my shower and breakfast, Holly and I went jogging on the beach in our bare feet. The water felt nice as it splashed against my legs, keeping me cool as I ran. I was quiet, trapped in my thoughts, while we kept a good, even pace, and even gave Hank and Blondie some good exercise as they kept up behind us. We circled the entire island, which I found was at least fifteen miles around. Holly and I had run along the beach before, even took a jog with Darren a few times, but I'd never been able to circle the entire island until now. When we headed back to the house, we walked waist deep in the water, giving my core and thighs a nice run for their money. By the time we made it to the front door, my feet were killing me from lack of support. In the end, it was worth it to get to run in the water.

After a quick lunch, Holly and I went for a walk through the island, with proper shoes this time, and I was content on trying to forget Darren's words. It was Thanks-fucking-giving, and that asshole had the nerve to tell me the day before that I would never see my family again and to bring them up would mean their deaths. Stupid motherfucker.

Today was supposed to be the day of giving thanks, of remembering everything you had to be grateful for. Did I even have anything to be grateful for? To be thankful for? I was alive, technically, but should I even be thankful for that? Some lives were simply not worth living, but I couldn't necessarily say that about my own. At least I wasn't a drug dependent sex slave in a Mexican brothel... yet.

Eventually, we came across the place where I remembered hiding the branch I had used as a makeshift bo the day I accidentally hit Holly in the face so many weeks ago. It was still right where I left it. As Holly and I walked, I nonchalantly picked it up and started twirling it in my hands. Holly regarded me curiously as she watched me play.

"Where did you learn to do that?" she asked me.

"Bōjutsu training," I replied. "The only weapon I ever mastered."

"That's awesome. Show me!" Holly beamed, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

I looked back at my guards who were about fifty feet behind us, wondering if they would object. After a few seconds, I finally decided fuck it.

"Step back then," I said, and Holly immediately obliged, giddy like a five-year-old.

Taking my time, I warmed up with some figure eights, twirling the bo over my arms and across my body. The motion felt good, almost as if I were stretching muscles I had forgotten about. Once I'd warmed up, I practiced a few tricks, spinning the bo above my head over my open palm before twirling it behind my back, over my leg, and around my neck and torso. Every move was flawless, calculated, and precise. I hadn't lost my touch after all.

When I was comfortable and had a good grounding, I performed an old form I used to compete with, winning me several first places. My movements were still just as sharp and strong, though I lacked my usual speed from lack of training. All my kicks and jumps and punches came out well enough to obviously impress the shit out of Holly. When I was done and out of breath, Holly jumped up and down like a little kid, which in turn, made me smile. It was nice to see someone happy with me for my talents.

"Oh, my God, that was so freaking cool! You're amazing, Jaden! Darren has no idea how lucky he is to have you."

"Thanks," I said, trying to hide my smile.

"Miss Jaden," Hank called. Holly and I both looked over at him. "Put the stick down, please."

I sighed in defeat. And there it was—my reminder.

"What do you mean, 'put it down'?" Holly said, suddenly angry. "Didn't you see what she just did? She's incredible!"

"That is beside the point. Mr. Davis does not want her to get hurt."

Holly furrowed her brows in disbelief.

"Holly, it's okay. Don't worry about—" I tried, but she continued on, actually cutting me off.

"Get hurt? She's obviously very capable of handling herself."

"We have our orders. Mind your own," Hank said sternly. "Miss Jaden, please." He nodded.

Without further argument, I dropped my makeshift bo to the ground and pulled Holly away to continue our walk. She folded her arms, a frown line immediately forming on her forehead as she walked with me, clearly upset by our little exchange.

After a while, Holly and I took a break and sat down, leaning our backs against the palm trees. At least, it was a beautiful day. The sun was out in full force while an easy breeze blew through my hair from the ocean. At

moments like this, I found myself actually able to relax and find a small moment of peace.

Hank and Blondie stood by about a hundred feet away, actually giving Holly and me some privacy for once. Weird. Holly eyed them carefully, and I could see the wheels turning in her head. She had been on the island just a few weeks, but she was already starting to pick up on the strange ways of my life and this island.

“They follow you everywhere,” she said quietly as she stared at them. “Why?”

“They’re supposed to watch over me,” I replied.

“Why do you need to be watched, Jaden?”

And here comes the digging. Fuck.

“Because I’m in recovery, and Darren wants to make sure I’m always cared for.”

“Jaden, you’ve recovered. Fully.”

I shrugged, trying to blow off her concern, but my heart was beginning to pound with unease. If Darren thought for even a second that Holly was on to him, she wouldn’t make it off this island alive, and I would not see her end up like the gardener.

“I know, but Darren can be overly cautious sometimes,” I said casually with a shrug. I didn’t want to give her the idea that I was anything but unsurprised by Darren’s behavior.

Holly folded her arms. “You and he seem to have a strange relationship,” she stated.

I raised my brow in surprise. “That’s awfully judgmental of you.”

“Well, he’s never around to spend time with you, yet your life seems controlled in almost every way. I mean, it’s friggin Thanksgiving, and he’s not even here to celebrate with you.”

“It’s just a stupid holiday, Holly. He has more important things to do,” I murmured.

“Stupid holiday?! More important things to do!?” Holly shrieked in shock. “Jaden, this *stupid holiday* is about giving thanks for the things you have and to appreciate what surrounds you. How can he not see that it’s an important day to spend with the people he cares about the most?”

I sighed in irritation, pinching the bridge of my nose to get myself together. Here I was, trying to defend Darren to protect Holly, and it was the stupidest fucking argument I’ve ever had.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Holly. You’re welcome to voice your concerns to him, but I imagine they will fall on deaf ears. He’s a very busy man.”

A flash of red fell over Holly’s face as she blew the air out of her cheeks in frustration. It almost made me laugh.

“So he’s too busy to care about you, is that it? You’ll accept his name on your own skin, and then sit around waiting for him like some kind of doormat?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Careful, Holly. You wouldn’t want this doormat to punch you in the face on purpose.”

Holly huffed and shook her head, waving off my threat. “I just don’t get it. He’s always so stern and intense whenever I’ve seen him, and every time you come back from finally spending time with him, you seem different.”

I furrowed my brows. That was too specific of an observation from her; to know she was paying that much attention to me made me uncomfortable.

“Different how?”

“Sad different. Defeated almost.”

Fuck.

“I mean, from the way it seems, it’s like you don’t even like him.”

Double fuck!

“And the choker around your neck that you never seem to stop fingering never leaves your throat. Why is that, Jaden?”

I hadn’t even realized my fingers were grazing along the smooth metal around my throat. I’d caught myself doing it once or twice, but apparently, it was a lot more than I thought. I didn’t even know why I played with it.

I shrugged again. “It was a gift from Darren. I like wearing it.”

Liar.

“Right. How did you even meet him anyway?”

I felt my stomach drop. Shit, I never thought I was ever going to have to come up with a bullshit story about my life with Darren. I needed to put Holly in her place and move past this.

“Ya know what? My relationship with Darren is none of your business so stop pushing. He’s a busy man and doesn’t always have time for me. I understand that, so you need to be, too. You’re here to help me get back on my feet, not judge my life. Now, can we move on, please?”

Holly sighed in defeat. “I just wished he treated you better is all. He’s a little scary sometimes, you know.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s mine to deal with, not you. You just focus on me.”

“Okay, Jaden. Whatever you say.”
And let’s keep it that way. For her sake.



When Holly and I got back to the house, we were both instructed to clean up for dinner. Confusion swept over our faces as Holly never had dinner with me; it was only ever reserved for Darren. But we didn’t argue.

When I was clean and dressed, Hank and Blondie escorted me down the hall toward the dining room, where, upon my arrival, I was wide-eyed and shocked. Holly was sitting at the table, across from my usual seat, smiling like crazy. But it wasn’t just her presence that had me shocked. It was what was displayed all over the table.

Thanksgiving dinner.

There were bowls of mashed potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce, salad, vegetables, and even green bean casserole, plates of several different styles of dinner rolls, and sitting in the center of the table was a delicious looking already carved monster of a turkey.

“Hi, Jaden!” Holly waved from across the room. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Wow.” I gasped as I walked over to the table. “Did you know about this?”

“Nope, not a clue,” she said. “Come on, sit down!”

I took my seat across from Holly. Even though Darren said he would be gone for a few days, I left Darren’s seat at the head of the table open, just in case he randomly showed up.,

Holly and I quickly loaded up our plates with just about everything and even went back for seconds. We sipped on chilled white wine and enjoyed pumpkin pie with vanilla ice cream for dessert. It was, without a doubt, the best dinner I had ever had in my captivity. By the time we were done, I was so full I could barely move. Darren would have been very happy with my appetite for once. So much was still left, I’d hoped we could enjoy the leftovers for the next few days.

After dinner, we retired to the entertainment room and watched all the Thanksgiving Day parades from all over the country. I loved the parades, but they only made me think of family—the one thing I was never supposed to mention or probably even think of ever again. In a way, Darren was right, though not for the same reasons. I needed to forget them so I could focus on the task at hand, but no matter how many times I've told myself that, the memories always seem to slip through the cracks.

My dad had always found pride in carving the turkey when my family would get together for holidays, even though he was terrible at it. You'd think he had cut the damn thing with a hatchet or something. Sometimes, my brothers would hand him one right when he was about to get started just for laughs, and then one year, he finally indulged. Thankfully, my mom was the pro in the family when it came to barbecuing it. God, those were the best.

Jason and I were usually always late because of his job, but we always managed to witness my father's hack job of the poor bird. Jason worked at a tank plant as the man responsible for making sure the cannons went boom. Ever since he was a little kid, he loved to blow shit up. His hands had small scars caused by burn marks from handling fireworks and firecrackers back when he was young and dumb. He'd since then grown into an explosives expert. I should know. Bastard blew my world up when I met him, and now, another one had turned it to ash.

Fuck, I missed my family.

I fucking missed my best friend, too. On Black Friday, she and I would skip the stupid crowds and curl up on my couch to drink our weight in wine and watch all the *Home Alone* movies. It was another holiday tradition for us. Fuck, I missed that bitch.

“You okay, Jaden? You’re crying,” said Holly softly, as she looked over at me, her face washed with concern.

Shaking myself from my thoughts, I quickly wiped my face with my hands to find my cheeks were, in fact, wet.

“Shit, sorry,” I mumbled. “I’m fine, I just... I just miss them.”

Holly rubbed my arm in an attempt to comfort me, a sad look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Jaden. I wish things were different, but we can’t change the past, unfortunately.”

“I know.”

But I can sure as fuck change my future.

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“Maybe it’s your weight distribution. Ya know, from one foot to the next?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s more than that. I’m not raising my knees high enough for the lift. That’s what ensures the height.”

Holly and I currently had our legs strapped around thick tree trunks while our upper bodies ached and trembled to hold our remaining upper body weight up. We’d been doing sit-ups earlier, and now, we were resting to see who could hold it the longest while discussing why my butterfly kicks lacked the height they usually did.

“I don’t know; you’re the expert. Maybe you just need more spring in your step,” she said, her voice strained behind clenched teeth. She was sweating, but she was doing well. My arms were casually folded in front of me as I fought to hold my weight up. My core was burning, but I loved the pain. No pain, no gain.

A few seconds later, I heard the sound of a boat approaching and looked over to see Darren and Scott pulling into the docks with a few of Darren’s men. It was then that Holly gave out.

“Okay, I quit.” She gasped in pain as she clutched the tree with her arms to drop her legs. She immediately collapsed on the ground, clutching her core. “You win.”

I held my position as I watched Darren climb off the boat and walk across the docks, his eyes suddenly catching mine when he looked over. I could suddenly no longer take the burn. I was low enough to the ground to bend down backward and place my hands on the ground. Releasing my grip

of the tree with my legs, I folded backward with a kick over, landing on my feet and into a standing position.

“Show off,” Holly muttered under her breath. I smirked as I watched Darren enter the house with Scott at his side. They were in a deep discussion over something. I was a little surprised I hadn’t been warned of his pending arrival, but maybe he just didn’t want me to know.

“I’ll see you later, Holly,” I called out as I took off in a jog. I needed to see Darren. I didn’t just want to do my part and thank him for the Thanksgiving dinner; I also wanted to tell him I was finally ready to leave the island. Holly had already said it. I’d fully recovered, so there was no longer any need for me to be here. And the longer I was here with her, the more she would continue to dig, and I needed to put a stop to that.

Heading into the house, Hank and Blondie followed me while I headed straight for Darren’s office. I knew that was the first place he’d go. Just when the door was in sight, I felt a hand grab my arm and pulled me back into a halt.

“Whoa,” warned Hank. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I need to speak to him,” I argued as I yanked my arm from his grasp.

“We’ve received orders he is not to be disturbed. He’s very busy.”

I looked at him incredulously. “But... it’s me.”

“You are no exception. Mr. Davis will see you at dinner. It can wait until then.”

“But it’s important.”

“Sure, it is, kid. Now, let’s go,” Hank said, rolling his eyes and tugging me away from the door.

Did he just call me kid?

Hanks escorted me down the hall and away from Darren’s office. Obviously, he didn’t want me pacing in front of the door so I could catch Darren when he left. Dinner was still hours away, so what the fuck was I supposed to do with my time then?

I opted for some bag time in the gym to distract me from my agitation. After fifteen minutes of slamming my fists into the fucking thing, Holly came in.

“There you are,” she said out of breath like she’d been running. “Where did you go?”

“I went to talk to Darren.”

“Oh. What about?”

“I didn’t get to see him because apparently, *someone* doesn’t want to be disturbed even though I have important shit to discuss with him.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just... I think I’m ready to leave the island,” I said almost apologetically.

“Oh, that’s... that’s great, Jaden,” Holly replied with a weak smile.

“Yeah, well, you said it yourself. I’ve recovered.”

“Yes, and you certainly have, Jaden. It’s time we get you back to the mainland.”

I nodded silently in agreement.

“It’s just that... I’m going to miss this. Getting to work with you was an experience I’ll never forget.”

My shoulders slumped a little. I almost wished she would forget. She was too innocent to ever have anything to do with Darren and his blood money. Even though she annoyed me on a daily basis, I still wanted her as far away from Darren as humanly possible.

“I’ll miss it, too,” I said honestly as I closed the distance between us.
“Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

I got closer to Holly’s face in hopes I could keep my voice low enough for her to hear, but no one else. “Just promise me that you’ll stay on your path and not deviate again. And to never, ever accept employment from *Mr. Davis* ever again. I don’t want him to fuck you over, and he has a tendency to do that sometimes.”

Holly furrowed her brows, her face washed with confused concern.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Fuck, I went too far. “Just trust me, okay? Darren is not the kind of guy you want to work long term for. He can be... shady, sometimes.”

Holly regarded me for a moment before she finally nodded her head.
“Okay, Jaden. I understand.”

I released a breath of relief only to suck it back in when Scott entered the gym with a mean look on his face.

“I need to talk to Darren,” I said quickly, but he just strolled right past me without even a glance in my direction.

“He’s busy. And so are you.”

Scott headed over to the shelves on the other side of the room and grabbed the focus mitts before walking back over to me.

“But it’s import—”

“Right, left, right back leg head kick, left hook, right uppercut, duck, left cross,” he said, cutting me off.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Fine.”

I followed through the combination, finally fast enough and able to complete my duck without Scott hitting me. Pride filled my heart when I saw him smirk at my improvement.

We moved around the room, changing up the combination every now and then while Holly watched from the sidelines in awe. Sweat dripped down the sides of my face while my heart beat rapidly in my chest. I stayed light on my feet as I maneuvered around the room, my arms tired from the exertion, but I kept going for the next hour until Scott decided he was done with the focus mitts and tossed them to the floor. I removed my gloves as well, tired of their bulk.

In a split second, he made a quick random advancement on me, which I gladly countered. He threw a quick reverse hook kick toward my head, which I immediately dodged, dipping low to the ground to sweep my leg over the one he was relying on to hold him up, but he jumped up to avoid it. He didn’t make another move as I quickly stood back up, my hands at the ready.

And then he started the real attacks. He made quick strikes to my head and body, which I was able to block and counter with my own. For every kick and punch he made, my feet remembered exactly how and when to move, the momentum of my maneuvers capable of dodging his advances like the goddamn professional I was. Adrenaline rushed through me like the drug I desperately depended on, my strength and speed increasing with each breath I took. My reflexes were just as sharp as I began to anticipate his moves, my eyes focused on the slightest twitch of his body.

Scott’s fighting style and techniques were almost the exact same as Darren’s, and I imagined it was because they trained together. Scott even held back the same way Darren did. I could feel it in his strikes. Though I knew Scott wasn’t going to hurt me, I didn’t give a shit about not hurting him, and when my scorpion kick connected with his face, a smile left my mouth when I watched blood drip from the corner of his lips. He stumbled back a bit, absolutely stunned yet... prideful.

“I’m ready to leave the island,” I stated, my shoulders square as I narrowed my gaze on him.

He smiled, a small chuckle rolling up his throat as he wiped the blood from his mouth with his thumb. “Finally,” he said, and then he left without another word.

I turned to the sound of Holly clapping for me as she nearly jumped up and down with excitement. “Holy cow, Jaden! I had no idea you could fight like that! That kick was amazing!”

I took a deep breath and slowly released it, feeling the adrenaline rush through my veins. “God, that felt good,” I whispered aloud.

“I’ll bet! You are officially the coolest chick I have ever met!”

I scoffed. “I think you need to get out more,” I said with a laugh as I grabbed my bottle of water and downed it.

“I’m serious! Absolutely incredible, Jaden.”

“Thanks,” I said with a small smile, unraveling the pink wraps around my hands. “I’m going to go clean up. I’ll see you later.”

After being escorted back to my suite, I took a long, hot shower to calm my nerves. What if I told Darren I was ready to leave, and he decided I’d stay on the island anyway? What if he never let me leave the island? I doubted it. Being out here had to make things more difficult for him to manage his organization. Returning home for good would make this easier for him, right? I just hoped Holly would be free and clear to leave, even with all of her digging. I thought I did a pretty good job at quashing it, and I hoped it stayed that way.

When I was done with my shower, I dolled myself up, knowing what I was likely to do later. I chose a white strapless layered sundress and added a little curl to my hair. I even threw on a little makeup and some perfume. In my strappy silvery-gold sandals, I paced the room, my arms folded over my chest as I contemplated how soon we might leave the island once I told him I was ready. I also wondered what kind of world I’d come back to. Would things be even more strict than they already were? Would there be new rules? Would I have to wear my cuffs again? Darren had said he had a new curriculum for me, and I feared what it might be.

Once we left the island, I’d likely be entering a whole new world compared to the one I ran from. And I was sure it was going to be far worse than my island treatment considering I’d have better access to certain resources on the mainland that I didn’t have on the island. Darren couldn’t afford to give me a single centimeter to gain an opportunity to try to

overthrow him. It was all about control with him, so I could kiss whatever “freedoms” I’d had before goodbye.

Fuck. This was going to suck.

Eventually, I was finally escorted to the dining room where I waited for Darren to arrive. My heart fluttered while I wiped my sweaty palms against my legs. I didn’t know why I was so nervous, especially since I was sure Scott had informed Darren what he probably already knew. After a few minutes, I notice Hank turn his head as if he were listening to something in his earpiece.

Goddammit.

“I’m sorry, Miss Jaden. Mr. Davis will not be able to join you tonight. He is being held up.”

I clenched my teeth in aggravation. I fucking knew this was going to happen.

“Could you at least get a message to him that I need to speak with him the moment His Majesty is available?” I growled in irritation.

“I will let him know,” Hank said with a nod.

“Thank you.”

After finishing my dinner alone, I was escorted back to my suite where I paced back and forth for the next several hours, waiting for Darren. I had no fucking clue how long it would take or if I would even get to see him today.

“Miss Jaden, I don’t know when Mr. Davis will be available to see you. Perhaps, you can find something better to do with your time besides pacing back and forth.”

“Shut up, Hank,” I said, chewing on my knuckles as I ignored him, continuing my pacing anyway.

He scoffed and sat back in his chair, obviously more comfortable than I was.

Finally, after another hour of pacing, the door opened and in strolled Darren. My heart skipped a beat as I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight. Darren eyed me for a moment before he addressed my guards.

“Out,” he said to them, and they immediately took their leave. Darren shut the door behind them before turning to me. I felt oddly on display while his eyes traveled up and down my body. I was still wearing the same dress and sandals, makeup and hair done even though I should probably have been in bed by now.

“I understand you wanted to see me,” he said, a frown line on his face as he took a few steps toward me.

I cleared my throat and squared my shoulders. “Yes, I did.”

He looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to go on. I blew a piece of stray hair out of my face and continued.

“First, I wanted to thank you for Thanksgiving dinner. That was thoughtful of you, and I’m grateful that you allowed Holly to be a part of it.”

Darren nodded, knowing full well the second reason he was here was much better than the first. “You’re welcome,” he said, his eyes narrowing in on me.

“And I also wanted to let you know,” I began again, my heart suddenly beating out of control. “That... I think I’m ready to leave the island.” There, I said it.

Darren’s head turned to the side a bit as he raised his brow, regarding me carefully. The intensity of his eyes had my nerves quaking and my body heating up.

“You think?” he asked, his arms crossing over his chest.

“I am,” I said more confidently.

“Are you sure?” he asked, all too cocky. Fuck, he was so close now; I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“Yes,” I said, almost glaring back at him to compete with the intensity of his gaze.

With one final step, Darren closed the distance between us and slowly brought his hand to caress my cheek. He gently tucked my hair behind my ear before sliding his index finger under my chin to lift my face up.

“You know what happens when we go back home.” It wasn’t necessarily a question, though I didn’t really want him to reveal the answer. But the look in his eyes was all the answer I needed because I immediately recognized that look—hunger.

“I have a pretty good idea,” I breathed, my heart pounding so loud I swore he could hear it.

With a slow torturous pace, Darren gently eased his face down to mine, his lips barely grazing over my own while his warm minty breath tickled my skin.

“I guarantee... it pales in comparison.” And then his mouth was on mine.

The moment our lips connected, it was like gasoline on fire. I wrapped my arms around his neck while his clung to my hips, pulling me closer to his massive body. Darren's tongue dove into my mouth, entangling with mine and eliciting a quiet moan from my mouth. God, for someone so awful, he tasted so fucking good.

A few short moments later, Darren lifted me up, allowing my legs to wrap around his hips while his hands supported my ass, squeezing and teasing. Our mouths still interlocked in an aggressive, desperate kiss, Darren carried me over to my bed, nearly slamming me down in a hurry. Liquid heat pooled in my core as his hands traced down my arms, setting my skin on fire.

"I like this dress," he said, finally breaking our kiss, his voice strained with lust. "But I like it better on the floor." And then he ripped the damn thing off me. For like, the millionth time.

"Hey!" I shouted as I watched the poor garment tossed to the floor in shreds. "I actually kind of liked that one."

Darren just gave me his sexy shark-like grin, and his snarkiness only aggravated me more. So I grabbed his shirt and forced it open, tearing it slightly and causing the buttons to fly off.

"You're not the only one who can rip clothing," I sneered back.

Darren's mouth lifted in a knowing smile. "That was a four hundred dollar shirt," he drawled as his lips moved closer to my mouth.

"Buy another one," I said and grabbed his tie to yank him down to my mouth, which he eagerly obliged.

Clutching his tie tightly in my fist, I kissed him with as much force as I could, wanting him to know that I was there and unafraid. He kneeled over my body; both hands on the bed on either side of me to hold up his weight, while one foot remained on the floor and his other knee planted right between my legs. Darren's lips owned mine in every way until I felt a small twinge of pain as his teeth latched down on my bottom lips, sending the jolt right to my clit.

"Is my princess trying to take control?" he breathed against me. I couldn't tell if it was a warning or an invitation.

"Let's experiment," I replied, my lips still connecting with his. "You might find you like it."

A barely-there chuckle rolled up his throat as he kissed me.

“Well then,” he said, grasping my hips. He then shifted his weight and pulled me on top of him so that I straddled his lap. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I smirked.

I brought my mouth down to claim his, pulling his shirt and jacket away while he rolled his shoulders in compliance to remove the clothing. Tossing his tie to the side with my tattered dress, I raked my nails down his bare chest while he gripped my hair and jerked my head to the side, exposing my neck. Pulling me forward, Darren feasted on my throat while his fingers dove into my slickness, causing my skin to tingle all over while my nails dug into his muscular shoulders. He stroked my clit back and forth, creating the most delicious friction while I bit my lip to keep from moaning too loud.

“You’re cheating,” I breathed huskily as I worked to keep my body from shaking from the pleasure he was giving me.

“Should I stop?” he asked against my neck as he bit down.

“Don’t you dare.”

And then he bit down harder, marking me with his teeth and causing me to cry out. Darren then laid all the way down on the bed, pulling my hips with him to place my aching slit over his mouth. His tongue eagerly began to lap away at my clit, sending my blood rushing through my veins as my hands dug into his hair.

“Oh, fuck, Darren,” I moaned, unable to control it any longer. I was so close to oblivion I could almost taste it.

Darren’s hand then smacked my ass hard enough to grab my attention as I gasped in response at his reminder. Still no cussing.

I found myself nearly riding his face as he feasted on me like a man starved. Every lick, every lap of his tongue drove me closer and closer until I was right on the edge.

“Oh, God, I’m there,” I breathed. And then Darren didn’t just nudge me over the edge, he fucking flat out shoved me.

His tongue dove deeper, harder, increasing the pressure on my clit until I was screaming in ecstasy; my orgasm powerful enough to cloud everything else around me. But before it was even over, Darren lifted me off him and speared me right on to his hard waiting cock. I groaned aloud as a new wave of pleasure rolled over me. I hadn’t even realized he had somehow managed to shimmy out of his pants while I was on top of him.

Darren groaned as he wrapped an arm around my waist, strained lust in his eyes as he fucked me with everything he had. My hands gripped his shoulders as I worked my body to sustain his pace, my core squeezing his cock for more. Darren clutched my hips in an almost painful grip, and he slid me up and down his cock, the force almost too good to handle.

But I knew Darren wouldn't remain in that position for long.

Before I even realized what he was doing, Darren had me on my back. He stood over me, fucking me with such force that if he hadn't been holding my hips, I would have been on the other side of the bed on the floor by now. But fuck if I didn't feel absolutely amazing.

Gripping the sheets beneath me, I kept my legs wrapped around Darren's waist, feeling the rush again as the pain from his thrusts collided with my pleasure, and I screamed out as an agonizingly amazing second orgasm hit me. As my core violently contracted, it gave Darren the final push he needed to fall over the edge with me, his groans and animalistic growls penetrating my ears as he finished inside me. Collapsing on top of me, Darren's mouth rested against my ear as he held the bulk of his weight up to avoid crushing me. He was breathing heavily, enough to cause me to smirk inside. I always gave him a run for his money.

Before he was even relaxed, Darren crooked a finger under my collar and yanked me toward him.

"You are so. Fucking. Mine," he growled, and a knot suddenly formed in my stomach. His dark words of possession always scared me a little on the inside. Sealing his words with a rough kiss, Darren lifted himself from me and picked up his pants from the floor.

"So much for experimenting," I murmured, sitting up.

Darren gave me an odd look before gracing me with that sexy grin. "I didn't stop now did I?"

"Pft, like you'd ever stop on my accord."

Darren chuckled at me as he zipped his pants up. "You're right. You're too goddamn gorgeous for me to ever stop."

I shrugged. "It's a curse."

On a grin, Darren finished getting dressed, gathering his ripped clothing before leaning over my still naked and flushed body for a long goodbye kiss.

"I'll arrange for us to leave in a week. Right now, I have too much shit to do," he said getting up to leave. "I expect you to be asleep in my bed in

less than twenty minutes. Understand?"

"Yes, Darren," I answered, trying to hide the annoyance in my voice and nearly failing.

"Good girl," he said and then shut the door behind him.

Once he was gone, I stood up and stretched my body, hoping to loosen my limbs a little from the strain they'd just experienced. I then cleaned myself up, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and changed into a little silk nightie before knocking on my bedroom door. Blondie answered, only cracking the door enough for me to see his face.

"I'm ready to go up to Darren's room now."

Blondie nodded, opening the door further so I could slip through. My bare feet padded against the wooden floors as we walked through the halls and up the carpeted stairs to Darren's room. Exhaustion hit me the moment my head hit the pillow, and I was out like a light.



Two hours later, I walked through my bedroom door, exhausted as fuck, but everything I had just been dealing with instantly melted away the moment I saw Jaden curled up in my bed. Her glossy red hair was splayed out all around her head while she hugged the pillow to her chest. God, she was so fucking beautiful and so fucking mine.

Stripping out of my clothes, I pulled the sheets down to get in beside her only to find she was still in her little nightie. Clenching my jaw, I furrowed my brows in irritation. Jaden knew better than this.

As carefully as I could, I pulled the nightie up her body, peeling it over her head before she finally woke, allowing me to remove the damn thing fully.

"What are you..." she said sleepily, but I just shh'd her.

"You know the rules," I said, tugging her thong down her legs.

"My bad." She yawned, closing her eyes.

When she was as she should be, fully naked, I pulled her small body onto my chest and eased into a comfortable position, pulling the sheet over her shoulders. Wrapping my arms around her soft skin, Jaden settled into me quickly without protest, her cheek resting on my shoulder while her tiny hand flattened on my chest. Placing my hand over hers, I focused on

obtaining that inner peace that she brought me when she was quiet and cute like this. It was moments like these that I craved—moments when my world finally came to a standstill because Jaden's slow rhythmic breathing was the only thing that had my attention. Moments when I was deep inside her, and she was screaming my name while she erupted around me, and I could get lost in all her pleasure. Moments when I could burn myself in the hateful fire of her amber eyes and relish in the pain. Because it was her. Because she was mine. And no one would jeopardize that. Ever. Anyone who tried to stand between her and me would meet an end so brutal it would take days to clean up.

And I could feel that jeopardy rising. I still hadn't located my snitch, and it was aggravating the shit out of me. Another warehouse had been hit, and the moment I found the little fucker, I was going to tear him apart. Slowly. I knew it wasn't Weldimer or his little gang. I hadn't heard a peep from those fucks, and according to Ronald, the transaction had gone through very smoothly. This warehouse was in Chicago, and though the attackers were easily killed, they left no indication of who they worked for. The protocol was to keep one of them alive for questioning, and obviously, that hadn't happened, so there was no one to retaliate against. I had no leads. Nothing. Their guns had been purchased illegally with no serial number for tracking. No wallets, no form of identification, not even a single tattoo to reveal their loyalties.

Scouts had already been planted among my ranks and all over my warehouses to sniff out the little fuck divulging information that didn't belong to them. Sooner or later, I always found them. It wasn't the first time someone thought it was a good idea to betray me, but I'd make damn sure it was the last.

Jaden released a quiet sleepy moan, her eyes wincing as she fidgeted. Bringing me back to reality, I realized I had been squeezing her hand a little too tightly. Instantly loosening my grip, Jaden relaxed against me, exhaling deeply through her nose as she settled once again. I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, feeling the silky strands between my fingers and appreciating how beautiful her angelic face was when she slept.

Closing my eyes, I eased myself back into the pillows and allowed myself to bask in the comfort of knowing Jaden was safe and peacefully asleep in my arms. Sometimes, it was the littlest of things that allowed me to sleep at night. Jaden was one of them.

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18

BAIT



For the next few days, I continued my usual routine with Holly and the occasional Scott, proving every day that I was beyond over this shit. I wanted off this godforsaken island even though I knew my situation wouldn't be much better when I returned to the mainland. If I thought I was isolated on the island before, I was in for a real treat when we got back to the estate. But I had to keep telling myself to bite the bullet and deal with it. I had earned those consequences, and they were still fucking worth it knowing Jason and my mom and brothers were out of Darren's clutches.

"Come on, Jaden, just one more," Holly said, almost sounding bored. I furrowed my brows as I finished my last one-arm push-up and stood on my feet.

"You okay?" I asked as I tried to catch my breath.

"Fine," she replied dismissively.

I looked at her and cocked an eyebrow, knowing full well something was up. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Let's go for a run."

"Okay," I said a little taken aback by her tone.

I followed her out of the gym, Blondie and Hank in tow as we made our way to the beach. Leaving our shoes on the grass, we took off at an easy jog. I couldn't help but glance at Holly every now and then as we kept an even pace along the shore. She was acting completely out of character. She

was quiet, which was completely unusual, and her eyes kept gazing off as if she were deep in thought about something.

“Holly, what’s wrong? Are you upset we’re leaving the island soon?”

She shook her head. “No, Jaden. Just something Mr. Davis said to me this morning.”

I stopped in my tracks, grabbing her arm to halt her to a stop as well. With Hank and Blondie a good twenty feet behind us, we could conceal the conversation with how loud the damn waves were.

“What did he say?”

Holly shook her head. Looking down at the ground, she locked her lips together to keep from spilling what she so obviously desperately wanted to.

“Holly,” I warned, narrowing my eyes at her.

She sighed, dropping her shoulders as she looked on to the ocean.

“He thanked me for my services, said I’d done wonders with you, and that... he couldn’t wait... for your *mother* to see how much you’ve improved.”

I felt my heart stop as Holly regarded me closely.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

Darren had told her my mother had died in the “car accident” I was supposed to have been in, explaining the cause of my injuries. Why would he fuck up his own lie? It wasn’t like him to contradict himself, and I doubt he forgot what he had told her.

Holly’s eyes remained on me as she stared me down like she had more to reveal.

“So, as you can imagine, that left me very confused because after I had left his office, I remembered being told your mother had perished in that car accident you were in and was to never bring it up since it was too traumatic for you to talk about.”

My stomach twisted in knots as Holly’s eyes grew angry.

“So I did a little digging and went through your medical records, which happened to be very easy for me to access, by the way. There was no mention of a car accident nor was there any mention of other injuries that would coincide with a car accident, such as scrapes or cuts. And if that so-called “accident” was severe enough to take the lives of three people, you’d have a hell of a lot more external injuries than just bruises. Your injuries don’t make sense for a car accident, Jaden. Because that’s obviously not how they happened.”

All I could do was blink; blink and pray this wasn't happening.

He baited her. Oh, my fucking God, he baited her.

I closed my eyes as I tried to keep my breathing even, to keep the tears from falling. I tried to conjure up some excuse, some reason for the shit that obviously didn't make sense, but I wasn't that good of a liar. Holly was clearly too set in stone in her convictions for me to have an impact anyway.

Instead, I wrapped a hand around my mouth to try to keep my chin from trembling. Turning from Holly, I fought to reclaim my fears, knowing full well the consequences that were about to play out. It was all my fault. I shouldn't have prodded her. I should have just ignored it and let it pass long enough for her to leave the island because here I was confirming her suspicions with my broken silence.

Why would he do this? Why would he bait her into making this kind of discovery? He must not have trusted her from the get-go. Holly had pushed before, asked questions that could have gotten her in trouble, and I had done a shit job at convincing her that my life with Darren was normal, that I was happy. And now, she was going to suffer for that. Because of me. Again.

"Jaden," Holly urged. I had yet to answer her. I didn't know what to say because the only thing I wanted to tell her was to run, but that was hopeless.

I finally turned back to her, knowing my eyes were nothing but wells filling with more despair than they could handle.

"I'm so sorry, Holly," I whispered, unable to raise my voice. "I'm sorry that you got dragged into this."

"Dragged into what?" she asked angrily.

"The shit storm that is my life," I replied, my voice defeated yet sarcastic.

"Jaden, what's going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

I took a deep breath, hoping I might still be able to defuse the situation.

"No, Holly. Everything is going to be fine. You just need to trust me."

"Trust you?"

"Yes, just trust me. Don't worry about the records or what Darren said. Just know that I'm alive and okay and that there's no reason for you to worry. Okay?"

Holly's brows furrowed as she regarded me like I was crazy. "You expect me to pretend like there's nothing wrong here? Like everything's okay?"

I nodded with a soft smile. I knew it wouldn't be enough, but I hoped. Good God, I hoped.

"Have you made your arrangements to return to your residency?" I asked, hoping someone was aware of her future plans.

Holly scowled. "I'm not scheduled to return for another month. Why?"
Fuck.

It'd be better if someone were expecting her like... tomorrow.

"What about your living arraignments? Where are you supposed to stay when we leave?"

"I'm still paying the rent on my apartment. It hasn't gone anywhere."

"So no one knows that you're supposed to come back in the next few days?"

"No, Jaden. There's no one to tell," she said, her tone becoming annoyed with my questions.

I sighed, more annoyed than she was. "Do you at least have a cell phone?"

"Yes, but the signal out here isn't very good," she quipped.

If that were the case, there was no way Darren would be able to conduct business on the island very well. He'd have to have a good connection to get a hold of anyone, not to mention I'd never seen him have trouble on a call before. He must have been transmitting something to jam up her phone's signal. Clever, motherfucker.

"Why are you asking me all these things?" Holly asked, her voice suddenly shaking.

"Because I want you off the island. Tonight. You should go back to your room and pack your things. Now."

"Why? Do you think I'm in some kind of trouble now?"

No point in hiding it now. Maybe there was still time.

"Yes," I answered sadly. "He baited you, Holly, and you fell right into his trap. Darren's not who you think he is. He's dangerous, and he won't hesitate to neutralize a threat when he sees one."

Holly scoffed. "A threat? He thinks I'm a threat!" she shrieked.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down!" I hushed her.

Suddenly, the seriousness of the situation finally dawned on Holly, and she began to shake while her eyes lit up with fear.

"Oh, my God, Jaden. Is he... is he going to kill me?"

Probably.

Her face washed with horror as she cringed into herself. I had to do something.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to sound reassuring, though I totally sucked at it. “I don’t even know if he knows what you’ve discovered. Maybe we can play it off like you’re still clueless. You can be a little ditzy sometimes,” I said apologetically.

“Gee, thanks,” she said sarcastically.

“Just lay low, don’t do anything irrational—”

“Miss Jaden,” Hank suddenly said, halting me midsentence. I looked over at him, suddenly worried he’d overheard us. “Mr. Davis would like to see you in his office. Now.”

My heart suddenly stopped beating. Oh, fuck.

“D-did he say why?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

“No, ma’am.” He shook his head, walking toward me and giving me a nudge toward the house. “Now, let’s go.”

In an odd manner, Hank and Blondie flanked us while we were escorted back into the house. I could feel my heart pounding out of my chest while I rubbed my sweating palms against my thighs. This wasn’t good. Darren never called me into his office.

He knew. He had to fucking know. There was no further explanation for why he wanted me in his office, right at this very moment. Fuck.

After putting our shoes back on that we left on the grass, I felt Holly continuously glance at me as if she needed confirmation for what I was thinking. She was scared. She should be.

“Ms. Ketter, if you’ll follow me, please?” Blondie suddenly said once we got back into the house, waving his hand in the opposite direction of the hallway.

All four of us stopped in the middle of the hallway, and Holly stared at me like she wasn’t sure what to do. So I stepped in for a quick hug and whispered into her ear.

“It’s going to be okay,” I lied. “Don’t worry.”

I let her go, and she gave me a sad smile before turning away with Blondie. I felt my lungs get heavy as I fought back the tears that threatened to choke me. I had to stop this. I had to be able to fix it somehow. I turned back around with Hank and followed him to Darren’s office like I was on death row, heading for the electric chair. I hoped that maybe he would just want a quick fuck and then be done with me. But I so doubted it.

When we reached the double oak doors, Hank knocked and waited for confirmation to enter. I suddenly wished I wore something sexier than just my light pink skort, white tank top, and running shoes. Maybe if I were in a nice dress, I could distract him with my body and come up with a plan for Holly.

The door opened, revealing Scott who looked down at me like he knew what I was in for. Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit. He stepped aside, and Hank ushered me through. Stepping outside, Scott closed the door behind me, leaving me alone in the room with Darren. Breathing suddenly became more difficult.

Darren's office was huge. There were a few windows here and there, allowing a nice view of the ocean, wood paneling against the dark brown painted walls, burgundy rugs covering wood floors, and another fireplace directly across from the large wooden desk toward the back of the room. Black leather chairs and couches were arranged accordingly throughout the room, along with a conference table, a fully stocked wet bar, and several well-stacked bookshelves.

I could hear clicking on the other side of the room, suddenly realizing as I stood awkwardly at the door that Darren was typing something at his desk. He was turned away from me, facing three monitors while he furiously typed away on his computer. I could feel my nerves getting the better of myself as I awkwardly looked around, trying to focus on a black and white photo on the wall in a shit attempt to distract myself.

“Come here, Jaden.” I finally heard him speak, drawing my attention back toward his desk. His voice was smooth and calm, yet it did nothing to ease my suspicion. He was still typing, his eyes centered on the screen in deep concentration.

Trying my best to conceal the wobbliness in my steps, I tentatively made my way over to Darren’s desk and around to his chair. I tried to sneak a peek at the contents of his desk, finding several paper documents scattered in neat piles, some charts, others looked like reports, contracts, and some documents containing a triangular shield-like logo with the name Triguard at the top of the letterhead. There were no knick-knacks or picture frames, nothing of any significance or personalization. Everything on his desk had a specific purpose, and as my eyes lingered on the pen basket containing a long letter opener, I wondered if any of it contained a purpose for me.

After a short moment, Darren finally stopped typing, making a few clicks with his mouse before swiveling in his chair around to face me. Without even so much as a glance, he grabbed my hips and pulled me onto his lap. I gasped in surprise, my heart fluttering wildly, but didn't fight him. Swiveling back around, Darren clicked on his screen a few times, bringing up a new window.

"I want to show you something," he said casually and then kissed the side of my temple.

When the window finally loaded, I realized it was a video clip, more specifically a clip from his security cameras. Darren clicked the play button and secured his arms around my body, loosely caging me against him. He seemed relaxed as the video began to play, but as soon as I was able to focus on the video, I became anything but.

It was of Holly and me, running on the beach before stopping right in front of the palm trees... where a camera had obviously been hidden. And then the camera zoomed in, increasing the volume.

"So I did a little digging and went through your medical records, which happened to be very easy for me to access, by the way."

I instantly tensed. He'd heard the entire conversation. Every. Fucking. Word.

Unable to stop myself, I jerked against him, wanting to break his hold and delete the clip, but that wasn't possible. Tightening his hold, Darren's grip on me abruptly increased, pulling me back to him, and I couldn't hide the shock in my breath. And then I felt his lips against my ear.

"When are you going to learn I have eyes and ears everywhere," he drawled.

Son of a bitch. He did have them everywhere, probably all over the island. In the house, I knew for sure, but in the damn trees?

"Please don't hurt her," I nearly pleaded, unable to take my eyes off the screen.

"She brought this on herself," he countered coldly.

"You baited her."

"Yes, I did. To see if she would dig, and she very clearly did."

"That's not fair," I said through gritted teeth. "She's only ever tried to help me."

"I never said I was fair. I told you what would happen if Holly didn't mind her own business. You did a piss-poor job at convincing her you were

happy with me, which only served to increase her suspicions.”

“I did everything I could,” I croaked, fighting back my tears as my chest filled with emotional agony.

“I’m sorry that it wasn’t enough,” Darren said, almost sounding regrettable.

I turned in his lap, suddenly desperate to change his mind. I wouldn’t be responsible for another innocent person’s life. Not again.

“Please, Darren,” I begged, my eyes wide as they searched his, hoping to swim past his icy barrier. “Please don’t do this. I’ll do anything. You don’t have to kill her. We can—”

Before I got a chance to finish my groveling, Darren’s lips assaulted mine, crushing me to him with a powerful kiss. Locked in his embrace, I pressed my lips into his, giving him exactly what he wanted, hoping to placate him before he violently tore himself away. Grabbing my hips, he shoved me off him while he instantly stood, groaning in irritation as I hit the floor.

“What’s done is done, Jaden. You failed to keep her blissfully in the dark, and now, I have to take care of it. Again.” His voice was cold and harsh as he walked past me without even a glance in my direction. He was going to go kill her. I couldn’t let him. I had to do something. Anything.

Before I could even register what I was doing, I launched from the floor and leaped onto Darren’s back, my legs swinging around to clench his waist while my arms slung around his neck for a rear-naked choke.

“You can’t do this! I won’t let you!” I screamed as I pulled with my all my might, trying my hardest to plant my feet between his thighs to dig my hooks in for the choke.

Grunting, Darren stopped mid-stride, reached up to grip my arms, and began to pull them away from his neck. I held on as tight as I could, pushing out my hips to extend my body to increase the strength of the choke, but it did nothing against Darren’s strength. Inch by inch, my arms finally gave way and allowed Darren to pull me off him completely. I wasn’t giving up, though. The moment he had my arms locked in his hands, I released my legs around his hips, and kicked my feet into the back of his knees, causing him to bend down in hopes of getting him to the floor, but Darren was already ready.

The moment his knees buckled, he had already pulled me around his body and nearly threw me off him to the floor. I rolled against the hardwood

and stood up quickly, my body now blocking the doorway thanks to where he tossed me.

“Get out of my way, Jaden. You should know better than this by now,” he growled, those cold eyes narrowing on me. I felt a shiver roll up my spine from the look he was giving me right now; the look that told me I would regret my decisions if I didn’t heed the warning in his eyes. I was so scared of him, so scared of what he could do to me, but the terror of what he would do, what he was about to do to Holly, outweighed it all. I’d suffer for it later, but I would suffer more if I stood by and did nothing.

“I’m not going to let you hurt her.” My voice lacked its usual conviction, but I would still fight him for as long as I could.

“Not your decision. Now, move.”

“No!” I shouted angrily, my eyes faltering to the floor. I didn’t want to look at him, afraid I’d lose too much of my nerve. I could see Darren shake his head, disappointed as usual.

“Have it your way then,” he said and charged forward.

My heart skipping a beat in a panic, I grabbed the first thing I could reach, which happened to be a big blue ceramic vase and hurled it at him. Without missing a step, he blocked it, causing the vase to crash to the floor, shattering everywhere. I felt my body immediately ready for a fight, my knees bending slightly, while the heel of my back foot lifted for optimal movement. My open palms quickly raised to protect myself while my upper body shifted defensively.

On a single blink, Darren’s hand quickly reached out for my throat, but I blocked it, turning my body and wrapping my hand around his wrist in an attempt for joint manipulation. His wrist in my hold, I kicked up, hoping to land one on his face, but he blocked it with his other hand, shoving my leg back down with such force, I was sure it would leave a bruise.

Jerking his wrist from my hold, he made another move for my neck, but I blocked, countering with a strike at his face, which he, in turn, blocked as well. Adrenaline coursing through my veins, I exchanged a few more strikes and blocks with him before I quickly became winded and Darren’s grip at my throat was finally a success. Shoving me back against the door, his fingers tightened around my neck while my hands struggled against his wrist.

“You’ve gotten slow,” he drawled, his breath even and his demeanor calm as his face closed in on mine.

“No thanks to you,” I said through gritted teeth. His grip was tight; it was not tight enough to inhibit my oxygen supply, but the threat was still there.

“A conversation for another time,” he quipped. “Now, if you don’t do as you’re told, Holly’s death will not be quick. It’ll be slow. And you will watch. Is that what you want?”

I nearly screamed in frustration. He was such a bastard.

Tears instantly burst from my eyes, sliding down my face in heavy droplets as I concluded that I couldn’t do anything for Holly, that fighting Darren would only make things worse for her. I was so useless in a world that was not my own.

“You’ll send me back weeks of recovery,” I tried to rationalize with him.

“You’ll bounce back. You always do,” he countered quickly, not a hint of emotion in his voice.

I gulped back my fears as I tried to come up with another way to save her. Darren was done playing games. I was physically well again; it didn’t matter that I would be a miserable little fuck once we got back to the estate, as long as I did what I was told... There had to be something else I could do here.

“Just let me keep her,” I replied, desperation now getting the best of me.

Darren instantly scowled at me, his brows furrowing in confused anger. Yeah, Holly annoyed the shit out of me, but if keeping her around meant keeping her alive, then I would do it.

“What?” he asked incredulously.

“Let me keep her. She can keep me company at the estate when you’re gone and help me maintain a better mentality for my life. She’s still useful, Darren. She doesn’t have to die.”

Darren released a heavy breath as he considered my words. The glare he was giving me didn’t give me much hope, but then his shoulders relaxed while his other hand reached up to my face to wipe away my tears with that pad of his thumb.

“No, Jaden. You are enough of a liability as it is. I will not take on a second, nor will I allow Holly to be your crutch. End of conversation. The only thing you will decide is how Holly dies, slowly and painfully, or quickly without a struggle. Which is it going to be?”

I felt my heart breaking all over again. No matter how I tried to rationalize it, no matter how many times I tried to look past the evil lurking in his eyes, Darren had no redeemable qualities. His well of sympathy had dried up long ago, or maybe it had just never filled in the first place. He was a monster, bred among monsters, and he never ceased to unleash his terror on another, and I had to stand by and witness it all.

On a choked sob, I released Darren's wrist, his hand remaining against my throat as I dropped my hands lifeless at my sides, surrendering my fight and giving him my choice of the lesser of two evils. If Holly had to die, I would prefer it to be quick and painless rather than slow and grueling.

A smug smile curved along Darren's face, and I couldn't help but respond with a disgusted scowl. "That's my good girl," he approved, and then, tightening his grip on my neck, he turned, taking me with him and threw me across the room, far away from the door. I rolled on the floor, several pieces of the broken ceramic vase cutting into my skin, as I caught myself against the hardwood.

Darren glanced at me for only a second before he opened his office doors and stepped out. "Watch her," he ordered to whoever was outside, and I felt the panic and regret come over me again. Scott and Hank immediately stepped inside, but I was already on my feet, heading for the open doors.

"No, wait!" I shouted again, suddenly changing my mind and still wanting to argue like the dumb shit I was. Even though Scott had already shut the door, I, for some reason, imagined having a better shot at escaping the two of them over one of Darren. I was wrong.

"Darren, wait!" I shouted, heading for the door and attempting to bypass Scott and Hank. Scott's arm quickly snaked around my waist and pulled me away. I clocked him in the face with my elbow and kicked Hank right between the legs as he approached me. As each second ticked by, I knew Darren was getting closer while Holly's life expectancy exponentially shortened.

"Wait! No! Please! Get off me!" I shouted, squirming in Scott's arms as he tried to get me under control while Hank fought to regain himself. Now that the decision had been made, my panic set in. My breath was unsteady, and my blood rushed with fear knowing Holly was about to die. And the fact that there wasn't shit I could do about it hurt far more than I wanted it to.

I fought harder against Scott, kicking, scratching, punching, and elbowing everywhere I could, but he would not let go. Hank finally seemed to get a hold of himself as he marched toward me, grabbing my wrists when suddenly a gunshot went off somewhere in the house, immediately ceasing my fight. I froze instantly, tears inadvertently spilling down my cheeks as I centered my attention on the announcement of Holly's death.

In my moment of brief distraction, I felt something poke into my skin and jerked my head down to find Scott had injected a needle into my arm. A wave of dizziness overcame me, and I felt my knees buckle.

“You fucking bas...” was all I could manage to say before my mind went blank, and I fell completely into darkness.

TWO DAYS LATER

I was numb, hopelessly and utterly numb. I had cried so much in the last day, I couldn't feel anything anymore. I sat on the edge of my bed, my short legs hanging off the side while my feet dangled a few inches above the floor. My hands gripped the edge of the bed as I stared out the window of my suite, watching the rain pebble down the window. Today was supposed to be a good day, the start of something fresh... because today we were leaving the island. Instead, it was a sad reminder that one less person was leaving... or had already left.

After I'd woken from my drug-induced slumber, I found myself in Darren's bed. He'd been sitting in the chair adjacent to me, waiting for me to wake. I'd turned away from him, unable to look at his gorgeously demonic face, and tried my hardest not to cry in front of him. Eventually, he'd gotten up and fucked me the entire night, reminding me of what I was and who I belonged to. He'd dragged me across his knee to strike my ass thirty times for attacking him and then bent me over to fuck me from behind. I refused to participate, keeping my face stone cold and emotionless, even when he'd force me to look at him while he emptied himself into me. And throughout all the hate, all the pent-up rage and despair, I'd still managed to lose count of the orgasms he compelled from my body. I'd told him the least he could do was get me off after all the shit he had done. That had earned me another set of twenty over his lap. Even as I sat here, my ass was still stinging.

Luckily, I hadn't seen him yesterday. He'd left to make sure everything was prepared at the estate for my return, meaning he wanted to make sure all the new security provisions were executed properly. My suite had already been packed up and put away, looking like I was moving out of the damn place completely. Hank and Blondie were still sitting in their usual seats near the door while they watched me. Darren had arrived on the island several hours ago; we were just waiting for the plane to be refueled while pilot rested up. I'd been praying like crazy before he got here that the damn thing would crash, only to be swallowed by the ocean and never seen again.

Another hour went by, and I still hadn't moved from my bed. The rain had stopped, but the remaining water droplets still clung to the window, sliding down like the ones on my cheek. I hadn't asked what happened to Holly because I hadn't wanted to know what Darren had done with her body. He hadn't even asked me if I wanted to pay my last respects. He just tossed her memory to the dirt like she'd never meant anything. Fucking bastard.

"Miss Jaden," Hank said, pulling me from my thoughts. "It's time."

So it was.

I nodded, standing without issue as I walked over to the door, Blondie opening it so I could walk through. My long cream-colored floral dress drifted over the floor as it flowed around me, and I wondered why Darren had requested I wear a longer dress. He usually preferred to have my legs visible, not to mention shorter dresses meant an easier chance of exposing myself and keeping my physical fight to a minimum if I didn't want to see more bloodshed than necessary.

Hank and Blondie escorted me outside where a car was waiting to drive me to the runway. It was only a ten-minute walk from here, but I suppose they preferred the two-minute drive instead. Ushered into the backseat of a pretty black Audi, Hank took the driver's seat while Blondie sat in the front passenger. I rolled my eyes when the child locks engaged the moment the car started. Like I was going to jump out of a moving vehicle and flee.

Idiots.

When we reached the runway, my eyes fell directly onto the small private jet with the name Air Guard on the side with the triangular symbol I saw on the letterhead in Darren's office. Hank pulled the car over and opened my door for me. I ignored his hand when he tried to help me out, gathering my skirt in my hand instead. The stairs to the jet were already

open, and I found myself getting nervous as Hank shut my door. I'd actually never flown before. All my family vacations as a child, which weren't many, had been by car, and I'd been too damn busy with school and work to vacay anywhere requiring a plane ticket. I didn't even have a damn passport.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw Darren step out of the plane and onto the tarmac where he waited for me. I found myself unwilling to move from the car.

"Miss Jaden," Hank suddenly said still standing by the door. I looked over at him, unable to hide the scowl on my face. "It has been a pleasure watching over you," he said with a warm smile.

"Fuck you, Hank," I scoffed and headed toward the plane.

Darren's eyes watched my every move as I made my way toward him. I felt my body vibrate with rage, as he looked me up and down in obvious approval of my appearance. When I reached him, my eyes immediately darted from him to the plane, unable to stand that possessive look in his gaze.

"Ready to go home?" he asked, barely able to hide the smugness in his voice.

Of course, I had to say yes and force myself to admit that his estate was my home. It's what he wanted to hear.

"Yes, Darren," I replied sadly, my eyes still locked on the plane.

I suddenly felt him grab me and pull me to him, my hands coming up to stop at his chest to maintain some distance while my mouth released an anxious gasp.

"Look at me when you speak to me," he said, his voice sharp and demanding.

My eyes instantly snapped up to his, the warning in his tone enough to curb my stubbornness but not enough to hide my glare.

"Yes, Darren, I'm ready to go home," I clipped angrily.

On a smirk, Darren dipped down and wasted no time claiming my mouth in an intense kiss. I gripped his arms as I held myself up against him, maintaining my dignity as I gave him what he wanted.

When he was done, I felt myself failing to find my breath. He was still a hell of a kisser.

"Go," he said, turning me toward the plane, and my nerves immediately reached a new level as I took the first step up the stairs.

Ducking his head into the cabin, Darren ushered me in, and I found myself surrounded by a cream-colored cabin of leather seats, carpeted floors, and mahogany cabinets. Darren guided me to a single seat by the window, and I sat down while my eyes traveled everywhere, noticing everything I could. My first time on a plane, and it would have to be a damn private jet of obvious luxury and comfort. Darren took a seat across from me, crossing an ankle at his knee. He pulled out his phone to make a call.

“We’re on our way,” he said to whoever. He was silent for a moment as he listened to the person on the other line. “We’ll discuss it when I get in,” he said and then hung up.

An unfamiliar popping sound came from across the way, and I shot my gaze over to notice the stairs had been pulled in by some guy who wore what looked like a pilot’s uniform. I could feel Darren’s eyes on me as I watched the guy latch the door when it dawned on me I probably shouldn’t be staring at him, mostly because he had a penis and all.

My eyes traveled back to Darren’s, and I found him absolutely glaring at me. Anxiety flooded my veins while I felt myself shrinking back into my seat, my gaze shifting apologetically to the floor. He seemed to relax after that.

A few short seconds later, the same man who had drawn my attention earlier came over to our seats and addressed Darren. I kept my eyes on the floor.

“Excuse me, sir, the captain is about ready. We’ll be taking off shortly,” he said.

“Thank you, Max,” Darren replied with a nod, and the man left without another word.

As soon as I heard the man enter the cockpit, the engines of the jet roared to life, and my pulse quickened. I’d heard takeoff was similar to a roller coaster ride, and though I loved roller coasters, they were only a few seconds at least and not hundreds of thousands of feet in the air. I felt myself grip the edge of the chair as I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my breathing. I’d dealt with so much worse, so why the fuck was I so nervous?

Because in a few short minutes, nothing but thousands of miles of air will be below you... and you could blow up.

“Jaden,” came Darren’s voice, and I immediately opened my eyes to acknowledge him. “You seem nervous,” he said, his eyes focusing solely on

me.

“I’m fine,” I retorted, looking away.

“If you prefer your lying ass to spend the twelve-hour flight over my knee, I can easily make that happen,” he threatened, his eyes cold and menacing.

Oh, just give it up, Jaden.

I took a deep breath before I finally opened my mouth. “I’ve never flown before, okay?”

Darren cocked an eyebrow in response. “Seriously?”

I turned to glare at him. “Oh, didn’t know that one, huh? I thought you knew everything,” I retorted irritated.

“Watch it,” he warned, his tone dark.

I turned my eyes away from him back to the window.

“How is it possible you’ve never flown before?” he asked, still shocked by my revelation.

I furrowed my brows. “I can’t tell you. You’ve forbidden it.”

“Unless I ask you, specifically,” he growled.

I exhaled an annoyed breath as I stared him down. “Family vacations were always by car since we all loved road trips. And since then, I’ve been too busy with work and school to take any time off.”

Just then, the plane started to move down the tarmac, and I felt myself jolt again. Darren smirked and then stood up, walking over to the bar in the corner. What was he doing? I knew we weren’t moving very fast, but we were about to take off. Shouldn’t he be sitting down? I peeked out the window to find the jet moving along the tarmac, rain still falling on the windows. I heard Darren clear his throat next to me and turned to find him holding a shot glass of dark liquid.

“Here. It’ll take the edge off,” he said.

I hadn’t had a drop of alcohol since Thanksgiving. *Fuck, yes.*

I grabbed the shot and slammed it back before handing it back to Darren. He then took my hands in his and pulled me from my seat.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my nerves coming out through my voice.

“Come here,” he said and sat down, pulling me on top of his lap.

“Is this a good idea? Shouldn’t we be buckled in?”

“Well, now this is an interesting side of you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so anxious over something so minuscule.” He chuckled as he looked

down at me.

I scowled at him as my cheek reluctantly rested against his shoulder, my legs pushed up to my chest.

“And here you thought you knew everything about me,” I responded.

Darren laughed. “You continue to surprise me every day, Jaden. It’s never dull with you around.”

“I doubt your life was dull to begin with.”

“Maybe I didn’t realize how dull it was until you came along.”

“Please; you said it yourself. I’m the biggest pain-in-the-ass liability you’ve ever had.”

“You may be a pain in the ass, princess. But you’re my pain in the ass. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Of course, he wouldn’t.

Just then, I felt the plane increase its speed, and I was jolted back into Darren’s body. He kept a good grip on me, but I still preferred to be in my own seat... with a real seat belt.

“Relax, princess,” he said with a smile. “Taylor is a very good pilot.”

And then the plane ascended into the air, and I about lost my shit as I clenched my eyes shut and breathed through the ever-increasing change in elevation. I ignored Darren’s soft chuckle.

When the plane finally leveled in the air, it did little to decrease my anxiety. We were now some thousands of feet up in the sky with nothing but air below us. Ugh. I was a tough girl, but I’d seen *Final Destination* too many times to ever trust planes.

After a few minutes of Darren gently stroking my back, I felt my eyelids become droopy and moved to get off him.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, gripping me tighter.

“I doubt you want me on your lap for the entire flight. You won’t be able to feel your legs,” I murmured as a yawn escaped my lips. Why was I suddenly so tired?

Darren smirked. “You’re not even remotely heavy, Jaden. But you are about to become dead weight.”

My eyes snapped to his, and then I felt myself slink against him. “What did you do?”

“Drugged your shot,” he said plainly as he pulled his phone out. “It’s a long flight. It’s better you sleep through it.”

Now, I was pissed, but I was too tired to berate him about it.

“Stop... drugging... my... shit...” I forced myself to say before the drug took over and it was lights out.



Jaden slumped against my chest, her soft rhythmic breathing confirming she was asleep as she should be. Her short legs dangled over my knees above the floor, her arms limp in her lap while her head rested against my shoulder. She was so perfect, so incredibly adorable, yet so infuriating. And maybe that was why I liked her, why I was obsessed with her. Her unpredictability was fascinating, and I couldn’t wait to see the change in her once we returned home.

Things would be different for her because everything would be even more controlled than it already was. She’d brought it on herself, but I had a feeling she was prepared to live with that. She could stay mad at me for Holly all she wanted, but in the end, she had to see the logic in my ways. She would learn to respect my decisions even if she didn’t like or agree with them. She would learn her place and adapt to the world around her. Whether she wanted to or not.

Before returning for her, I made sure everything was in place for her arrival. Her new bodyguards were on standby and had been specially trained to handle her with the utmost care. Firm, but gentle. If Jaden got out of hand, she was to be tranquilized immediately to prevent further injury, and when she woke up, I would deal with her.

She was not to sulk in her room all day. I wanted her mind and body active at all times. There would be no opportunity for her to sink back into that depression. And she would be watched twenty-four-seven. Her bodyguards would watch her until her bedtime; two more men would wait outside her bedroom door when she wasn’t sleeping in my room, and I’d have my men standing outside the house patrolling her windows. Any chemicals, substances, or tools that could be used or devised into a weapon were removed from her room and bathroom. No more makeshift Molotov cocktails.

So long as Jaden behaved, she could go outside as often as she wanted for however long she wanted. She had to remain within the sights of her bodyguards at all times and listen to every command without complaint or

else there would be consequences. No skipping meals and she was to exercise every day, though I doubted that would be an issue.

She had a long way to go to earn my trust back, and even then, I wasn't sure if I ever really could. I still had to show her that life with me could be good, but she had to learn and accept her place first. That was always the hardest part with her, making her listen. I needed to come up with a way to get her to become just as obsessed with me as I was with her—one total mind fuck. I had an idea, one that I knew would work, but I wanted to exhaust all other options before I finally pushed her that far.

Curling a lock of her red hair around my finger, I rubbed my thumb over the soft strands, and I couldn't help but notice the corner of my mouth starting to ache. I was smiling like a fool. She did that to me when she was quiet and subservient. But I loved the fight in her... I loved it a little too much. I wanted that fire of hers to burn me while I fucked her into oblivion. I wanted to feel her nails drawing blood from my back while she screamed my name in ecstasy. I wanted her to hate fuck me until I couldn't feel my dick anymore. And when the lines between love and hate finally began to blur for her, all she would feel for me was passion. Beautiful. Obsessive. Passion.

That was enough for me.

I hoped.

20

CHAINS



When I finally woke up, I was sitting back in my seat with my seat belt strapped tightly around my middle. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I yawned and stretched, finding Darren sitting in his seat across from me with his focus on his laptop. Curling into myself, I pulled my knees up to my chest, my long dress covering my legs entirely, and gathered enough courage to look out the window. My stomach churned as my eyes lingered on the land below us, the clouds surrounding the plane, and the sun bright as fuck in the distance. After a few short seconds, I'd seen enough and closed the window. That was when I felt the pressure on my bladder increase.

Twisting my legs together, I tried to hold it for as long as I could, but I had no idea how much longer we'd be flying, and I didn't want to piss myself in the middle of our landing. Taking a deep breath, I finally found the courage to speak.

"Darren?" I said, looking at him.

"What," he said, never taking his eyes from his laptop.

"I need to use the restroom." Darren clenched his jaw while his eyes narrowed on the screen. He must not have liked what he read.

"Toward the back, first door on the right."

Unbuckling my seat belt, I stood on wobbly legs and made my way to the back of the plane. I found the door, stepping inside the tiny bathroom, and quickly closed it.

Alone at last.

After relieving myself, I washed my hands in the sink before catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Surprisingly, I looked good. My skin was smooth, a nice number of freckles spread over my face and arms, my hair glossy, long, and wavy while it cascaded around my shoulders and down my back. I looked healthy, but I also looked sad, broken... defeated. I was stuck on a plane bound for the same place I'd escaped from. I was going back, and I was fucking terrified.

I didn't know what kind of world I would return to, and I had no clue how much more strict Darren was going to be with me. Fuck, I'd probably have to have his permission to breathe. I could feel the tears coming, the anxiety starting to shake my body with panic. I was so scared of him. And I was so tired of being scared all the time.

"Jaden, come out of there, now," came Darren's muffled voice on the other side of the door. Shit, I'd been in here too long.

Quickly wiping my cheeks and airing out my eyes, I took a deep breath and opened the door to find Darren standing in front of me. His arms were crossed over his wide chest, his white button-down shirt open at the top, and allowing me to see some of the hard muscle underneath. With the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his tattoos only made him look more menacing as he glared at me. I felt my face blanch.

"Sorry. I needed a moment," I said softly, trying to make my eyes as big as possible.

"Well, I hope you're done. We have business to discuss," he said sharply.

"Okay..." I said cautiously.

Darren then held out his hand for me to take. Biting the inside of my cheek, I placed my hand in his, the connection alerting my nerves as he clasped his big fingers around my hand and led me away from the door toward the back of the plane. He opened a door that led into a small bedroom and ushered me to sit on the bed. It was soft and plush and big enough to fit his length. Darren moved to a closet and pulled out a familiar briefcase, and my heart immediately shriveled into a tiny ball of despair. Darren unlatched the lid, confirming my worst suspicions, and I couldn't help but look away, fighting more tears.

"Now that you've recovered and we're returning to the estate, it's time to get you back into your old routine," he said, his back to me as he fiddled

with the contents of the briefcase. “Starting with these...”

He turned to me, and I knew exactly what he was holding in his hands. He casually walked over to me, standing directly in front of me, but still I looked onward, taking deep breaths to get through the anxiety. Darren dipped down with a smile and kissed my temple.

“Give me your wrists, princess,” he commanded softly.

I held them up without protest or hesitation, my eyes still lingering off to the side. I felt Darren grip my right wrist, and I shuddered inside as I felt the cold metal latch around my skin. I bit my cheek harder as he placed the second cuff around my left wrist, and I suddenly felt compelled to claw off my own skin.

Darren stood to his full height, placing his hands in his pockets and smiling down at me.

“That was easier than expected. No complaints, no protests?”

“No point,” I replied dully.

“Someone’s finally learning,” he said and then pulled me up to his chest. My eyes still refused to meet his. “Look at me,” he ordered, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger and forcing me to look up at him. I tried to blur my eyes so as not to focus on him, but I was caught off guard when I thought I almost saw concern wash over his face.

Releasing a breath, Darren’s lips formed into a tight line as he casually wiped the tears from my cheeks like they were nothing more than dust on a TV screen, clouding the picture.

“Why are you crying? You knew this was coming,” he said as he looked me over.

“Doesn’t make it any less difficult.”

“You’re the one who makes it difficult for yourself.”

I shrugged. “Sorry, I’m a human being with feelings and not a psychopath like you,” I snarled and then immediately winced with regret as I bit my lip.

Darren’s hands nonchalantly traveled to my hips then suddenly jerked me toward him while his lips found my ear. “If that’s the case, then I’d focus on trying to avoid pissing the psychopath off. You never know what he might do,” he warned, his voice low and dangerous.

“Good point,” I replied softly.

Darren then bit down on my earlobe, sending a jolt through my body. “Get on the bed,” he ordered, but there was no mistaking the lust in his

voice. That simple order was all it took for my body to instantly ready itself for what was to come next, my core already beginning to heat up. A few words were all it took to flip the switch, and my body instantly remembered who commanded it.

Slowly, my eyes never leaving Darren's, I sat down on the bed, planting my palms on the mattress and waited for his next command.

“Turn around. I want you on all fours.”

Without missing a beat, I turned my body away from him, crawled further onto the bed and positioned myself as he had asked. Knots tore at my stomach as I waited for his next move, my breathing becoming heavy with anticipation. After a moment, I felt his weight shift the mattress behind me and trembled when his hand whipped my dress up, exposing my ass and bare back. Biting my lip, I bit back the gasp ready to leave my mouth when Darren's hands traveled over my skin, burning me in their wake. I could feel my core growing hotter by the second, ready for the onslaught that it knew so well... the same onslaught that it craved like fucking air.

“Who do you belong to, Jaden?”

“You,” I said softly.

And then I felt the harshest smack against my ass, the same ass that was still sore from the last beating it took. I cried out sharply as the pain radiated through my skin like glass.

“Who?” Darren shouted angrily as he ripped my thong from my hips.

“You!” I yelled desperately.

And then, just like that, he entered me with full force, thankfully gripping my hips to keep me from nose-diving into the headboard.

“Goddamn right.” He groaned as he pulled out and re-entered, eliciting a moan of pure pleasure from me. “So fucking mine.”

Like a jackhammer, Darren's forceful yet pleasurable thrusts sent me to the brink of madness. He filled me entirely, stretching my walls to accommodate his large size, which allowed each stroke he made to bring me closer and closer to ecstasy.

“When we return to the estate,” he began with a grunt, slowing his thrusts but not the intensity, “you will be supervised twenty-four-seven. And you will *listen* to your bodyguards.”

“Unsurprisingly,” I moaned under my breath.

“You will not be permitted to sulk in your room all day. You will be productive at all times. If you can't find something to occupy your time, I

will devise a schedule for you.”

It was difficult to concentrate on the new rules he was laying out while he fucked me like this. The pleasure too good to ignore, yet my focus was still required.

“You will eat regularly and will not leave the table until you’ve finished your meals. I will not have you withering away on me.” He groaned, each thrust bringing me closer to my release than the last.

“I motion,” I said, biting my lip from moaning like a cat in heat, “for smaller portions.”

“Denied,” he stated, finally silencing my voice by grabbing my hair and forcing my head down to the bed, causing my ass to rise up in the air and giving Darren a better angle.

“You will exercise daily for at least an hour. You will not exhaust yourself nor will you train in a manner that will cause harm to your body.” Ironically, he slammed into me so hard I couldn’t help but cry out.

In other words, no more bruised knuckles.

“You will not be permitted to go outside without my say-so. So long as you’re a good girl, and do as you’re told, I will reward you.” His voice was low and labored, palpable with lust.

I was so close I could almost taste it.

“On the days I do allow you to go outside, you will remain within sight of your bodyguards, and you will not go beyond the trees.”

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered under my breath. I was ready to explode.

As he neared his own release, his thrusts became brutal, bruising me in the most pleasurable way. I couldn’t stop the moans that left my mouth of their own accord while my hands dug into the sheets as I fought to hold myself together.

Adapting to the intensity, I took everything he gave me until I could take no more. The orgasm came quickly, furiously, causing every muscle in my body to tense up as my internal muscles squeezed Darren’s cock for everything he had. Darren groaned aloud as he found his own release, his thrusts slowing but still just as firm before he finally stopped.

Still buried inside me, Darren yanked my head back by my hair and growled into my ear.

“Disobey me, and I will kill one family member while you watch helplessly from a screen.”

My breath caught in my throat as I fought against the depression that threatened to rise.

You knew this. You knew he was going to use that against you.

“Have I made myself clear?” he barked.

“Yes, Darren,” I whispered back, a single tear making it past my barrier.

“Good girl,” he said and pulled out of me, leaving his seed to seep out of my lips and down my thigh. “Get cleaned up. We’ll be landing in an hour.”

I waited for the door to close before pushing myself off the bed and heading back into the bathroom. Once I was clean, I ditched my destroyed thong and walked back to my seat where Darren was already waiting for me. Strapping myself in, I pulled my legs up to my chest, my dress covering my entire lower half, and summoned up the courage to open my window. We seemed lower to the ground now, the plane slowly making its descent every few thousand feet. I could see buildings and trees, roads and small bodies of water. Clouds whipped by us, the sun still shining above, yet even in the midst of an experience I had never had before, my concern was not of the sky, but of the ground below.

Now that Darren had laid out the new rules, I felt myself wanting to slip back into my depression, to give way to the tears that wanted to fall, to crumple in the exhaustion of trying to stay strong. The cuffs that chilled the skin around my wrists and ankles reminded me of how hopeless my situation was.

A new chessboard had been laid out—my family members were my pieces and Darren’s empire, his. The unfairness was that my pieces were blind to the game, unaware that they were even playing. I’d hoped that my message to Jason would get through to them, but obviously after my “death,” the idea of a threat against them seemed to be debunked. They probably thought Jason was crazy now and probably resented my mom and brothers for disappearing. Everything was so fucked up, but at least I’d gotten four people away from Darren’s clutches... for now. I knew his men were still looking for them, and I didn’t know if I could survive it if he found them.

21

UNWELCOME HOME

A small bout of turbulence shook the plane, dragging me from my thoughts and causing me to grip the arms of the chair. Darren remained unconcerned as he rested his chin in his hand, his eyes still focused on the screen of his laptop. He was watching something, and by the looks of it, he didn't like what he saw. His jaw was clenched, his eyes cold and narrow, clearly deep in thought. Something was going on; something he wasn't telling me, something he wouldn't tell me.

An announcement came over the speakers, declaring we were about to land. I looked out my window to find the approaching runway up ahead, excitement and nervousness mixing in my stomach. I could see Darren in my peripherals as he shut the laptop in obvious irritation and placed it in a bag by his seat. A few moments later, my body experienced the change in elevation, the pressure fluctuating before we finally hit the ground. I didn't know anything about landings, but it felt smooth.

When the plane finally came to a stop, the engines cut out, but my nerves increased. When the door was finally opened and the stairs released, Darren stood and escorted me out of the plane. Nodding at the pilot and co-pilot in obvious thank you, Darren led me down the stairs where we were greeted by three black BMWs and about six men dressed in black. They waited by the cars, their hands neatly placed in front of them, their blank expressions hindered behind dark sunglasses.

Darren kept a firm grip on my shoulder as he walked us to the middle car where one of his men opened the door for me.

“Sir,” he said with a nod of acknowledgment to Darren.

Scooting inside, Darren followed me in, watching as I buckled my seat belt and turned my head to stare out the window. Moments later, more doors slammed shut, the car took off, and we were in motion. As I watched the outside pass by, I realized even though I'd been with Darren for the past five months, this was only the second time I'd been in a vehicle with him. I was grateful he allowed me to sit in the seat like a human being, instead of between his legs on the floor.

Darren ignored me for virtually the entire drive, which lasted about an hour. He spent most of his time typing away on his phone, and I was fine with that. The more shit that occupied his time, the better. At least then, I wouldn't have to deal with him.

Now that I'd been outside the estate, I couldn't help but smile as we passed through the small town to get to Darren's estate. The corners of my mouth curved as I remembered speeding off down the road on his Ducati, giving his men and the pocketed police department a run for their money.

"Something amusing?" Darren asked.

I smirked and casually pointed out the window. "I popped a wheelie on your bike right... there." I grinned, pointing to the exact spot as we drove by. "Pretty sure I scared the shit out of one of your guys." It was probably a bad idea to poke fun at the idea of my successful escape, but he was the one who asked.

When I turned my head back to Darren, the look he gave me was positively deadly. I gulped back my regret.

"Well, I hope it was enjoyable because you will never ride another motorcycle like that again," he said sharply.

I shook my head in disappointment. "You're wasting my talents," I said, turning my head back to the window.

"Excuse me?" Darren quipped, anger beginning to rise in his voice.

I exhaled a deep breath. "Penguins can't fly, but if you were to see one do it, you wouldn't try to stop it, now would you?"

Darren cocked an eyebrow, but I could tell he wanted me to elaborate.

"Guns, motorcycles, fighting? Not many girls come with the skills that I have. In your line of work, you're better off exploiting them than burying them."

"And what do you know of my line of work?" His eyes narrowed at me, dark slits just waiting for the challenge I was presenting.

I shrugged. “I know it’s dangerous and beyond illegal. And I’m smart enough to understand that your life is probably under constant threat, especially considering you have two cars to flank us with a total of six men to protect you, which then inevitably, also puts my life in danger. Am I getting warm here?” I asked. I shouldn’t sound so cocky, but he had to know I was right.

“I have a feeling you’re trying to make some kind proposal,” he sneered.

“I don’t think you want to fully domesticate me, not really, anyway. Watering me down wouldn’t be in your best interests, not when I have so much more to offer you than just a pretty face with a hot body.”

Darren instantly relaxed, crossing his arms over his chest, and leaned back against his seat, a smirk on his lips and the cockiness of a crime lord giant. “And just what else exactly do you have to offer me?”

“You can feel secure in the fact that when I eventually become the target of your enemies, they’ll regret trying to play the damsel in distress with me.”

“And what makes you think you’ll ever become said damsel in distress?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please. The moment you marry me is the exact same moment you declare me as your weakness to the world. You already know they will try to use me to get to you.”

“They can try,” he said, the cockiness in his voice unnerving. “And by try, I mean fantasize about it in their heads. You underestimate my capability in the underground and the civil world. My organization is much more than what you think it is, with ties further and deeper than you can imagine. Yet some will still try to cross me. I’ve been to war several times, Jaden, and I’ve never been beaten. So should the day come when some idiot decides to attempt to fulfill his little daydreams of overthrowing my empire, I will once again remind everyone why I am not to be fucked with.”

Goddamn.

“So in response to *wasting your talents*, you have nothing to fear because I plan to have you match me in just about every one of *my talents*. The idea of anyone seeing you as my weakness will be gone before it’s even thought of. I don’t have weaknesses, Jaden, and I will not allow you to become one; therefore, you will be my strength instead.”

I furrowed my brows in confusion.

His strength?

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that by the time I’m done with you, my enemies will not even bother marking you as a target because you will not be worth the bloodshed that you would deliver should *you* ever be trifled with.”

A dark look came over Darren’s eyes as he grinned with satisfaction of his plan, and I felt my stomach drop. He was going to make me like him, and I was too busy trying to figure out if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

A few minutes later, I could see the black and gold gates to Darren’s estate open for our entry. Trepidation swept over me as we pulled up to the house. More men waited outside for us, only this time, most of them carried assault rifles openly.

Darren opened the door and helped me out of the car. My eyes traveled among the men waiting for us, and I saw Scott heading them up at the front of the line. But Darren had his sights set on two super tall men who stood off to the side. His hand on my shoulder, he led me over to them, and I wondered if maybe they were my new babysitters.

“Sir,” they both said with a nod.

Darren smiled. “Jaden, this is Clive and Owen,” he said, pointing at each one. “They are your new bodyguards.”

I looked up at him. “Clive and Owen. Seriously?” I nearly laughed. They were officially one name to me now.

“Absolutely. They are among my best men and have been trained to anticipate any little line of bullshit you might try to feed them to gain an advantage.”

“Sounds like a challenge to me.” I smirked, crossing my arms over his chest.

“You would see it that way. But the only thing I see is an invitation to getting your ass beat by me should you test them. Should you get out of hand, they will tranquilize you immediately, and I will deal with you when you wake. I suggest avoiding that as best you can.”

“Noted,” I replied with a nod as I studied them.

I didn’t want to stare for too long, but the one named Clive had short buzzed black brown hair, zero scruff, and looked to be just a tad younger than Darren was. The other one, Owen, seemed even younger, late twenties with blond hair, slightly longer than Clive’s. They both wore the same outfit

as the guards on the tarmac, but the sunglasses they wore seemed a little different in shape—more angular and the color was different, certainly not standard.

I was beginning to see a pattern in the uniform of his men. It seemed the ones who guarded the house wore more combat gear, as if they were ready for an assault at any time, while the men who accompanied him, my guards included, wore less combative but more athletic. Normally, in the movies in organized crime, everyone wore suits but not Darren's men. They seemed to wear clothing more fit for their stations. It made sense. If I wanted guards protecting me, I wouldn't want them fighting in the restrictions of a suit either.

"She is to stay in her room for the remainder of the day," Darren suddenly said to them.

And just like that, I went right back to being treated like a child. I couldn't help but huff in disappointment.

Darren turned to me and bent down to kiss me on the cheek. "Behave," he warned in my ear and walked away to address Scott and several others.

Stupid fucker.

"This way, please, Miss Jaden," Clive said and immediately escorted me back to the house. A shadow of pain crossed me as I entered the house, the one I tried to run from so many months ago, and now, I was back, being nearly pushed up the stairs to my old prison cell.

Owen opened the door for me, and I reluctantly walked inside.

"We'll be just outside the door," Owen said, but it was meant as more of a warning. "There are men patrolling your windows, so don't get any ideas. Your dinner will be brought to you shortly. Knock if you need anything." He then closed the door and locked it, actually leaving me alone in my cell.

Exhaling deeply, I turned to examine my old room, finding it looked the same. Everything was in its place, exactly as it had been left. Padding over to the bathroom, I looked below the window I had tossed my Molotov cocktail out of and noticed the damage fixed. But after seeing the guard with an assault rifle and a German shepherd come into view, I immediately ducked back inside. I didn't want them thinking I had ideas. Opening the cabinets, I found a lot of shit missing. There was no more alcohol, nail polish remover, bath oils, matches, or even candles, for that matter. All my sharp little tools like my cuticle cutters, metal nail file, nail scissors, even my rat-tail comb was removed. Obviously, someone was a little paranoid

and a little overcautious. He had my damn family on the table. I wasn't going to jeopardize that by attempting to stab him with a nail file.

Shaking my head at the ridiculousness of it all, I took a long hot shower, hoping to smooth out some of the kinks that had worked themselves into my shoulders. When I was done, I wrapped a towel around my body and stepped out into my bedroom only to jump back to see Clive Owen standing by my table. They both immediately turned their eyes in another direction.

"What are you doing?" I asked them, clutching my towel even tighter.

"We've been instructed not to leave until you've finished your dinner," Clive said.

I rolled my eyes. "Do you mind if I get dressed first, or do I have to eat right this second?"

"Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Jaden," Clive answered.

Yeah, okay...

Shaking my head, I walked into closest to find the exact same clothes as before. Now that it was November, it wasn't exactly as warm as it usually was, so I opted for a longer purple striped sundress. I quickly brushed my wet hair out and then made my way over to the table and sat down. Dinner was roasted chicken with rosemary potatoes and mixed steamed vegetables. I managed to eat most of it, though it was difficult to do with Clive Owen watching me the entire time. With only a few bites of potatoes left, I was beyond full, hoping they would concede to that before pushing my plate away. Owen shook his head.

"All of it, ma'am," he said.

"You've got to be kidding me," I complained. "I can't fit another bite."

"We have our orders," said Clive chiming in.

"Do your orders include wearing your sunglasses indoors?" I asked. They hadn't removed them, and even though the shade had lightened a bit, I still thought it was weird.

"Yes," they both said.

I rolled my eyes. "If I throw it up, it's your fault then," I snarled and then shoved the remaining bites of food into my mouth.

With my nerves constantly running amuck, it was difficult to devour a large meal. Normally, this much wouldn't be that difficult, but my stomach had shrunk in size significantly, especially after my thirty-day liquid diet.

Shoving my plate away from me, I abruptly stood and stormed my way onto my balcony, slamming the French doors behind me. I heard the door to

my bedroom close, and I knew they'd left. There were plenty of men standing around below me, so there was no need for them to think I was going to make some crazy elaborate escape now.

Trying to calm myself down, I sat on the lawn chair and curled into myself. I thought about the conversation I'd had with Darren in the car just a few hours ago. He'd mentioned his mother and how they hadn't gone to war since her death. I'd never asked how she died since I never cared. It was probably better that she never got to live to see her sons become monsters anyway. But now, it seemed she had been killed, which must have started the war Darren had mentioned. A war he'd clearly won. He was young then, still just a boy, and I was sure the bloodshed that came from that kind of retribution was the cement to his character.

The loss of a parent was difficult. My dad, his mom—I didn't know which was worse, knowing your parent and losing them forever or never really getting to know them in the first place. Either way, I was sure his dad wanted revenge for the loss of his wife, regardless of whether they had children. I wondered how it happened. Clearly, it was away from the estate and obviously by one of their enemies. If the war was bad enough to cause other organizations not to cross Darren's, it must have been one hell of a fight.

Fuck. Just what the hell was I up against?



Toward the end of the evening, after the shift change, Jaden's bodyguards arrived in my office to report on her day, even though I already knew how it had gone. I wanted to know what they thought, if they noticed the same things I did, and what they would do to avoid escalated situations in the future. Clive and Owen both sat in the black leather chairs across from my desk and sat like the perfect soldiers they were.

“So how was Jaden’s first day back?” I asked them, relaxing into my chair.

“Good, sir,” Clive answered. “Though she was a little argumentative, she is beginning to adjust.”

I nodded in agreement. “I noticed she rearranged her room today,” I said.

“Yes, she did do that,” Owen replied with a nod.

“Do you know why?”

“She said she didn’t want to return to the same room she once escaped from.”

I smiled at his ignorance. “You’re half correct, Owen.”

I could see his eyebrows furrow behind his special glasses. They were designed to register heat signatures as well as gain access to the security cameras throughout the estate so they could not only see every potential threat, but they could also watch Jaden without completely fucking with her privacy.

“Jaden rearranged her room in a way that she thinks will give her a defensive advantage against me,” I continued, and this time they both gave away their confusion. “Did you notice where she moved her bed? On the adjacent wall between her bedroom door and bathroom door? Did you notice which side of the bed she decided to sleep on? The one closest to the bathroom door?”

Clive and Owen raised their chins as if they suddenly realized what they had missed.

“It would take me an extra six steps to get around the bed to get to her before she’d make it to the bathroom. Before, nothing impeded me, and though those six steps are not much of a concern to me, nor will they protect Jaden from me any more than if her bed was right in front of the bathroom door, it was still something the two of you neglected to foresee.”

Clive and Owen both looked at each other as if they were ready to start apologizing, both clearly becoming uncomfortable.

“It’s okay, boys. I’m not mad, but this is an example of the kind of shit she will try to pull, and she’ll do it right under your nose if you’re not careful. Jaden is no idiot; she is very intelligent, and she will continue to find ways to push the barriers of her boundaries until she runs out of options. You must be there to foresee and discredit those options.”

They nodded in unison, their postures stiffening as they considered the challenge ahead of them.

“She will try to push you and annoy you. Do not give her the reaction she wants. It’ll only encourage her. One day, this behavior will cease, but until then, you need to be suspicious of almost everything she does because it’s almost always in her own self-interest. You don’t have to address every

little thing she does, but make sure she understands that you're on to her, and eventually, she will stop bothering. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they both said in unison.

"Good. I'll be gone most of the day tomorrow. So long as Jaden is cooperative, she can leave her room. It's supposed to storm tomorrow, so she is not to wander outside. I've had the staff set up her paint set in the upstairs office. You can suggest it after her workout if she likes. Questions?"

Clive and Owen both regarded each other before Owen spoke. "Do you want us to have her put her room back the way it was?"

I shook my head. "No, no. Let her think she has the right idea, and I'll show her it was wasted effort."

"Yes, sir," they both said.

"Good. Dismissed."

Clive and Owen both left without another word, leaving me to deliberate the future ahead. I expected some resistance from Jaden, some new forms of rebellion, whether they were sneaky or up front, she would find new ways to seek an advantage. And I feared I would have to let her fail in every attempt before she would finally succumb to her fate. She needed to come to the conclusion that every idea she had, no matter how small, was useless to her, that her efforts would be foiled and her ass reddened for even thinking of it in the first place. I had to quash the idea of escape. I knew she wouldn't make the same mistake of fully escaping a second time, not with her family hanging in the balance, but that didn't mean she wouldn't try to line up her dominos and wait for the right moment to watch them fall. I had to make sure there were no dominoes left for her to take—until she finally came to realize she no longer wanted them.



Two weeks back at the estate and it was as if I never left. The staff and other guards still ignored me like I was invisible, except for the two stupid fucking stalkers who never left me alone. If I thought I annoyed the shit out of Hank and Benito, Clive and Owen deserved awards. They directed me everywhere—where I could go, what I could do, how long I could do it, and whether it was considered productive. They analyzed everything I did down to the tiniest detail; suspicious I was trying to thwart them in some way. It was kind of cute.

I had to admit for the first day or so, I did test my boundaries with them, but to their credit, they never gave an inch. They never cracked a smile, no clever comebacks, not even so much as a smirk. They were like ice, and they never melted. I'd only been threatened to be tranquilized twice since they first started, which I thought was decent enough on my part—once, when I refused to paint the first time they introduced me to my “art room,” where I deliberately put my knee through a canvas, and another time, when I argued too much to continue my workout. I was only allowed an hour since Darren didn’t want me exhausting myself, which was bullshit. He worked out at least two hours a day, so why couldn’t I?

But after a few short days, the fight in me began to die. With zero inches to be given, I felt stuck, moving in a single file line with no deviations in sight. It was do as I was told without argument or wake up back in that fucking cage I hated so much. I could feel myself slipping back into my

depression as I went through my days, mundane as ever, like the good little robot they all wanted me to be. Most days, I felt emotionless, doing things of no interest just to keep Darren happy.

He tried to spend more time with me, though I was less than enthused. I was still pissed about Holly's death, and when he explained that it was unlikely she would have made it off the island alive in the first place, it didn't help much. I didn't argue with him; instead, I'd nod my head and do my best to remain complacent, almost to the point I thought I would bore him. When we fucked, I didn't fuck him back; I just laid there, came when he made me, and waited for him to finish. I no longer cared. I didn't know if that was a good thing or not, but I had a feeling if I became too dull, he would once again try to light my fuse. But the truth was I wasn't interested in interacting with him, not in the same way, at least.

I no longer felt the need to push his buttons because that would require attention on my part; that would only give him the edge he wanted. I knew I couldn't ignore him. I'd been punished for that before. So I just gave him the bare minimum, which I had a feeling would become exhausted soon. The push was coming. I could feel it. I just didn't know what form it would take.

But the more troubling problem was... I almost wanted him to light the fucking fuse.

As more time inched by, I quickly became bored out of my fucking skull. I had no short-term goals, nothing to motivate me to accomplish anything except for Darren's orders that I do something "productive" every day. With everything as controlled as it was, it didn't take long for me to realize how much I lived for the tension between Darren and me.

Yeah, he was dangerous as hell, terrified the shit out of me, and would hurt me if I got out of line, but fuck if I didn't love to play with fire. It got me off, and I knew it worked the same way for him. Maybe I was truly becoming a masochist because when I knew shit was about to get real, I felt more alive than a baby bird taking its first flight from the nest.

In the middle of the week, Darren was working from home, and after I'd finished painting a new piece, I'd been told I'd be meeting Sid for a reason that no one would tell me about.

"Wait, what?"

"Please follow us, Miss Jaden," Clive had said, directing me from my room out into the hallway.

“I want to talk to Darren,” I retorted, remaining firm in my position. I wanted to know why the fuck I was meeting with Sid. I hadn’t seen him much since our last “private” conversation on the island.

“He’s busy. Now, come on,” Owen quipped.

I balled my fists in my bands until my knuckles turned white. This was it. This was Darren lighting my fuse. But he wasn’t just putting a match to a wick. This was gasoline on a bonfire.

“Fine,” I spat and stormed through the hallway as they escorted me to some private office downstairs, coincidentally, not far from Darren’s office. This was stupid. He was just going to listen in on everything I said and then I’d be in trouble for telling the truth when he didn’t like it. This was a fucking trap, and it wasn’t fair.

Clive and Owen opened the double doors, and I found Sid sitting on one of the couches in the center of the room. There was another comfy looking couch across from him, with a small coffee table with a tray of tea and snacks laid out.

“Hello, Jaden,” Sid said with a warm smile. I responded with my usual bitchface.

“Sid,” I said.

“Have a seat, please.” He gestured toward the couch, and I took a seat while Clive and Owen closed the door and stood a few feet behind the couch. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you.”

Sid took a sip of his own mug before setting it down on the tray and picking up his notepad. I felt the tension increase.

“Well, I thought you and I could have a nice private chat, just between the two of us.”

“Private?” I said, pointing my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of my shadows.

“You can speak freely here, Jaden. There won’t be any penalties for what will be spoken today.”

“Yeah, right. You have no authority to guarantee that.”

“You have Darren’s word,” he said seriously.

“His word by your association?”

“I promise you, he approved this. Please don’t feel hindered by the lack of notice. He wanted to catch you off guard in hopes you would be more... honest.”

I scoffed.

“So how are things? How are you feeling?” he asked me, his warm attitude quickly becoming annoying.

I tilted my head. “Really, Sid?”

“Miss Jaden, please remain cooperative,” Clive interrupted, the subtle warning a reminder to get my head out of my ass.

I turned my head to him. “He said I could speak freely, so shut the fuck up, Clive!” I snarled. I’d been here less than a minute, and I’d already felt more emotion in the last few seconds than I felt in the last two weeks. It was easy for anger to find its way into my life.

“Watch your language,” he replied sternly.

I sighed in annoyance. “I’m as good as can be expected, Sid. I hate my life, but I’m alive. What more do you want from me?”

“We all just want you to be healthy and happy,” he said with a shrug, somehow actually sounding sincere.

I snorted. “We can’t always get what we want, Sid. Trust me, I know.”

“You seem to have adjusted differently than expected,” he continued. “You follow the rules without complaint, you tend to your own needs when required without prompt, and you seem to find some spectrum of enjoyment in your day, yet there’s still no spark left in you, Jaden. Where has it gone?”

I smirked. My assumptions were officially confirmed.

“So Darren is bored with my compliance already, huh?”

“I never said that,” Sid replied quickly.

“You didn’t have to. I know what he wants. I’ve just been waiting for him to admit it,” I said slyly.

“What do you mean?”

I released a breath of satisfaction and smiled. “He’s not the only one who knows how to test people, Sid. He wanted obedience, I’ve been obedient. Like a goddamn robot, I’ve done everything he’s requested of me without argument like he expects. You want to know where my spark is? It’s in Darren’s fist, and instead of bothering to pry his fingers open, I’m waiting for him to grow tired and loosen his grip.”

“Miss Jaden,” Owen warned.

“Well, that’s quite an assumption. You think Darren will tire of your obedience? Why do you say that?”

I rolled my eyes. “This is basic psychology, Sid. Everyone knows once you complete your conquest that you move on to the next one. Otherwise,

you'll get bored. Darren is no different with me. I'm just proving that to him."

Sid's eyes narrowed. "Do you think it wise to test him, Jaden?"

I shrugged off his warning. "He does it with me for the same reason I do it with him. Neither one of us is exactly forthcoming with information, Sid."

"So you're just pretending to be overly obedient to annoy him? Is that it?"

"Sure, Sid. Let's call it pretend. Let's pretend that if I don't listen to him, he won't hurt me in the worst way imaginable. Let's pretend he's not holding my family over my head to ensure I listen to him. And let's pretend I don't hate every second of my existence so that he can feel a smidgen of enjoyment with me. I'm just a big fucking pretender," I snarled.

"Miss Jaden, please watch your language," Owen reminded me again, and I whipped my head around to glare at them.

"If the two of you won't shut the fuck up, I'm going to turn into a miniature Hulk and then you'll be forced to tranquilize me and ruin my 'therapy session.' Sid said I could say what I want, so sit down and shut up."

"Let's move on then," Sid interrupted, obviously now trying to distract me. "Why don't you tell me what else is on your mind, Jaden?"

I flat out laughed. "I can't if the Wonder Twins back there won't stop interrupting me. This is fucking pointless, anyway. I'm sure I'm already in trouble as it is, and I don't feel like contributing to my own demise any more than I already have, so I think I'll just cut this session a little short. What do you say?" I said, standing up, but Owen took hold of my shoulder and pushed me back down to sitting.

"Come on, Jaden. You've been so cooperative throughout everything else. Why is now any different?" Sid asked.

"Because this is bullshit. You're just going to try to get into my head, and it's not happening. I'm not going to allow you to attempt to breach my mental walls to give Darren another advantage over me. You've already confirmed what I wanted to know, and I have no further need to cooperate, so just let me suffer my life in peace now."

"Jaden, I just want to know what can be done to make things less miserable for you."

I huffed, anger beginning to spread through my veins like wildfire. “Any suggestions I make are strictly against the rules. Why torture myself with the idea of freedom when I know I’ll be denied every time?”

“What do you want, Jaden? Just start with something small.”

I exhaled sharply. “Fine. I want to be able to go outside when I want and wherever I want WITHOUT Rocky and Bullwinkle constantly up my ass. I want to be able to go beyond the trees, where I can find one moment of peace when I don’t want to fucking kill everyone around me.”

“That seems reasonable,” Sid said with a nod.

“No, it’s not, Sid, because I can’t be trusted. And I’ve earned that mistrust.”

“Everyone has to be given opportunities to earn it back.”

“Good luck explaining that to Darren.”

“Darren’s a reasonable man, Jaden. Give him time.”

I turned back to Sid with more menace than I had control of. “Reasonable? Are you serious? Reasonable!? Oh, my fucking God! This is why this is bullshit! You call threatening to murder my entire family if I don’t comply with his rules reasonable?” I nearly shouted, fresh anger seething through my voice.

“Well, n-now, let’s be fair here,” Sid stuttered, now seeming to backtrack.

“Fair? Are you fucking kidding me! Do you even know what that word means?” I shouted, rising to my feet and looming over him.

“Calm down, Jaden,” Sid practically pleaded.

“Miss Jaden, please cooperate,” Clive demanded.

I almost turned and knocked him out myself.

“Calm down? You’re the one who wanted to get inside my head and try to tell me that Darren is a reasonable man when you and I both know that’s a fucking lie. See? This is why these little bullshit therapy sessions won’t work on me, Sid. Because all you’re going to try to do is attempt to rationalize my situation from the wrong perspective. The only thing you’re focused on is getting me to accept my status as Darren’s slave for the rest of my life and somehow be happy with that.”

“Jaden, you can be happy. We can make this work,” Sid said softly.

In a fit of rage, I grabbed the edge of the coffee table and ripped it out of my way, spilling tea and shattering the contents of the table to the floor. Terror filled Sid’s eyes now that there was nothing blocking him from me.

“Just like it worked for Darren’s mother?” I snarled.

I could feel Clive and Owen rounding either side of the couch, most likely to put me under. I wasn’t having any of that. While they were at each end of the long couch, I turned, hopped over the back and tore the doors of the office open to bolt down the hallway. I needed to get the fuck away from all of them. But as I ran, the doors to Darren’s office abruptly opened, and Darren rushed out to block my escape, anger and concern washed over his face. Too pissed off to deal or slow down, I danced around him quickly, ducking under his arm as he reached for me.

“I knew it!” I shouted at him as I turned back to run for the door that led outside. I knew he’d been watching!

“Jaden!” I heard him angrily call after me, but I was already at the door.

“For once, Darren, just leave me the fuck alone!” I shouted back, basically running for my fucking life now. If he came after me, it was game over. But as I ran, I didn’t hear his footsteps coming after me, so he must have let me go. He was actually letting me break his own rules for once. Maybe he knew that I needed a moment alone just as much as I did.

Pushing my legs harder, I raced into the trees, angry tears threatening to take over as I jumped over the dead branches scattered over the trail. Once I felt I was deep enough, I slowed my run down to a brisk walk, my head constantly turning back to make sure I wasn’t being followed. After a while, I felt my heartbeat finally calm down knowing I was far away from the house and deep enough for the trees to shelter me, I hoped. Eventually, my walk slowed, and I started to focus on all the trees around me, the birds flying around and singing, and the warm rays of the sun shining through the green leaves. It wasn’t as warm as usual, but it was still a nice day out.

A few minutes later, I came across a clearing of soft grass, and I decided to take the opportunity to sit down and clear my head for a while. Kneeling down on the grass, I found a comfortable position, bowed my head, and took a deep breath, releasing through my nose until I felt relaxed and focused.

I’d broken so many rules back there, and I knew I was in for it when I returned. I’d have to apologize; maybe Darren would lessen my punishment if I admitted I was in the wrong. I knew he’d been listening the entire time; I knew he couldn’t resist. I probably shouldn’t have brought something up as personal as his mother, but if she couldn’t survive this life, I wondered how long I could.

How long would it take before Darren's enemies made a move against him? Targeting me in an attack to get to him? It obviously wasn't unheard of. That war was over ten years ago. People change. They grow up to have big egos thinking they can rule the world and everyone in it, and Darren was no exception. Eventually, some little monster was going to take the throne of his father and stir up a whole bunch of shit when they tried to stake their claim in the underground. Darren wouldn't stay young forever, and the task of staying at the top of the food chain would eventually weaken him. This was such a stupid live fast, die young life. Did anyone ever live long enough to grow old in this business?

I needed to get more info on Darren's family life, especially his childhood—what his mother and father were like. I wondered if maybe his mother had left a journal behind somewhere, anything to give me an idea of the past. Maybe that was my key to unlocking my future.

Through my meditation, I kept hearing something shifting in the bushes. I winked an eye open toward the sound to find a bush about ten feet away from me jerking oddly every few seconds. That was when I caught the soft orange color rummaging in the bush. I narrowed my focus on color until a small fox carrying a dead rabbit in its mouth finally emerged. Fascinated, I'd never seen a fox in the wild before. It was orange outside its body, but mostly gray bushy fur everywhere else. It looked at me for a few seconds before it finally took off at the corner of the clearing and disappeared into the trees.

I hadn't been stupid enough today, so I got up, intending to follow it, but lost it just as quickly as I saw it. Wandering the woods for a while, I studied the layout of the woods, trying to leave the memory of the estate behind. Eventually, I caught the sound of yapping and yelping off in the distance. Following the sound, I finally came across the source and immediately ducked behind a tree. Gently turning, I quietly peered around the tree to find a den of gray foxes eating the remains of the dead rabbit I had seen earlier. There were four of them, three kits and what was probably the mother. Two of the kits were fighting over the bones of the rabbit while the third chewed on a small hunk of meat that hung from its teeth. The mother laid on her side, her eyes scanning the area around them in high alert.

The kits were adorable; though they weren't very small, they were still fuzzy, gray poofy balls with claws and teeth. They were fascinating to

watch, finding I could lean against the tree for hours without moving just to focus on something other than what was waiting for me back at the estate. But it was getting cold, and the sun was itching for a setting. My stomach rumbled in protest of not being fed, and I decided it was probably time to head back and face the music.

Trudging back to the house, I prepared my apology, ready to accept whatever came my way without complaint with the assurance it wouldn't happen again, but I could never guarantee that. Fucking hell, this was going to suck.

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23

WAITING



I was getting sick and tired of the constant ticking of my dark chrome Rolex, reminding me that Jaden still wasn't back yet. It'd been nearly three hours, and I was ready to start pulling my fucking hair out. I made the decision to let her go, to let her run from the session so she could have a moment to collect herself and come back in one piece. Apparently, that took three fucking hours.

I'd had my dinner at the kitchen island while I stood and watched out the window, waiting for Jaden to emerge. I was furious, anxious, and worried. For all I knew, she could be lost with a broken leg somewhere and was in dire need of help, but that was a stupid assumption. Jaden was not a helpless little girl, yet for some reason, I kept treating her like one.

I'd modified her cuffs to measure her heart rate, body temperature, exercising habits, and even her sleep patterns. After a while, her pulse had slowed to a deep calm, jumped again, and then relaxed again. I wanted to know what the fuck she was doing out there, but I fought with myself to give her some privacy. Clive and Owen wanted to argue and go after her, but angering myself even more, I denied them. Sid told me this might happen, that she would run like this, even though she knew not to. In a way, I'd expected it, too, though I was shocked to hear her bring up my mother.

She'd compared herself to her more than once, but I didn't want her thinking she'd share the same fate as her. It would never happen. I would burn the world first.

What pissed me off more was the fact that she thought she'd been testing me before. I'd known what she was doing the entire fucking time. It'd be a cold day in hell if ever she were a step ahead of me. I knew her too well, knew how the wheels in her cute little head turned. She'd become too compliant to the point of annoyance, and I knew she was doing it to make a point. I missed the fire, the tension, the way she hated me with so much passion I could practically feel it claw at my skin when I fucked her. Now, she was dull, unemotional, and irritatingly robotic. And I knew it was my fault.

I liked control too much, needed it too much. Control was safe, reliable, and brought with it every advantage possible. If I wasn't in control, then someone else was, and I'd be damned before I let that happen. In my world, you couldn't afford to look weak because the moment the sharks smelled blood in the water, there would be nothing left but a throne to claim, and I'd already claimed so many as it was.

Jaden had yet to understand why I couldn't yield. Eventually, she would. When the darkness of my world revealed itself to her, she would. She would also learn that playing games with me was never a smart idea, especially if she was trying to undermine me.

At long last, I caught sight of the magnificent red shine of Jaden's hair as she walked out of the woods and toward the house, seeming calm and collected. Unharmed. I couldn't help but release a small breath of relief, but it was short lived as the anger returned to replace it.

"Sir!" Clive yelled from the living room as he came to my side.

"I see her," I said, my narrowed gaze never leaving her small form as she trudged toward the house.

Following her every move, I stormed my way toward the door right as she walked in. She stopped abruptly when I cornered her, and actually flinched like I was going to hit her. She had good reason to. I wanted to smack some sense into her, but it angered me for some reason that her first instinct was to flinch, rather than raise her hands in defense as she normally would... because she was going to *let* me hit her.

Fear washed over her beautiful face as her amber eyes landed on me. I knew I was probably unconsciously glaring at her, but I was pissed and wanted an explanation.

"Well?" I said, lifting an eyebrow and crossing my arms over my chest.

Jaden folded her lips and gulped back her trepidation before she finally spoke, her eyes raised with determination and responsibility.

“I’m sorry for running. I didn’t mean to take off like that. I just sort of... panicked. I just needed a moment to collect myself before I did something... worse,” she said confidently.

“You were out there for three hours, princess. You missed your dinner, and you worried the shit out of me,” I said sternly. I sounded like an angry parent, chastising their child.

“I know. I’m sorry. I would have been back sooner, but I don’t exactly have a way of telling time out there.”

“What did you even do out there?”

“Meditated mostly,” she murmured with a shrug. “Wandered for a while until I calmed down. I know I messed up, and...” She sucked in a breath and eased out her exhale before meeting me head-on. “I’m prepared to accept whatever punishment I deserve for my behavior. I won’t complain, but you should at least know it was more out of panic and frustration than it was defiance,” she stated.

I sighed. I should have known that therapy session with Sid was going to lead to trouble. Forcing Jaden to talk about her emotional turmoil was never going to work, but neither was allowing her to bottle up everything. She needed an outlet—one that didn’t require aggression, but, instead, was something that made her smile. But I was too fucking busy to devote that kind of attention to her. I’d have to plan something for her, but I had no fucking clue what.

Pulling her into my chest, I wrapped my arms around her and held her close, inhaling her in and allowing my own raging heart to relent. I felt Jaden’s small hands slowly reach around and place them at my back, permitting herself to melt into me. I could feel her body begin to tremble slightly. She was scared—afraid of how I’d punish her for running off like she did. In a way, it was a good start. She was coming to fear the consequences of her actions, and that was the way it should be. But first, I needed confirmation of something more important.

“Lift your dress,” I drawled into her ear.

On a deep breath, Jaden reached back for her skirting and slowly lifted the fabric to her hips, giving me access to everything I wanted. Jaden kept her eyes low as I gently reached into her panties, and much to my satisfaction, I found her wetter than the fucking ocean.

I groaned with desire. “Oh, good girl,” I whispered unable to hide the lust and approval in my voice as I rubbed her wetness slowly back and forth over her clit. Jaden released a sharp breath, her teeth biting her lip as she tried to fight against the pleasure. Her face began to flush, her breathing uneven as I brought her closer and closer to the edge. She trembled at my touch as I spread her wider, teasing her even more than I already was. Her knuckles were turning white from holding the skirt up, and I had a feeling she was going to bite right through her lip if I didn’t stop soon.

Leaning down, I kissed her mouth, forcing her head to tilt up and swallowing the moan she released as I finally penetrated her hot core. Even around my finger, she was still so tight. Much to Jaden’s muffled whimper of disappointment, I removed my hand and licked my fingers clean of her delicious arousal as I gazed down at her, beyond ready to finish what I started.

“Upstairs,” I ordered, jerking my head in the direction of the stairs. “Now.”

Jaden dropped her dress and immediately obeyed my order.

“Dismissed,” I said to her bodyguards and followed her. Jaden wouldn’t need them for the rest of the day.

For the remainder of the night, I did something I thought I would never do. I didn’t just fuck Jaden; I did what I might have actually considered making love. For once, I was gentle with her body, kissing, caressing, worshiping every inch of her until she was so lost in her own pleasure that she couldn’t even remember all the horrible things I’d put her through in the last six months. Even I couldn’t remember why I’d been so furious with her earlier; I was so lost in her perfect body. She didn’t just respond favorably to the attention I was giving her, she’d reciprocated, kissing me back, and actually pulled me to her rather than push me away.

I gave her everything she wanted and more, for once, allowing her to forget everything—who she was and what she was—and just drowning her in a night of passion and lust. I’d even fed her myself; feeding her forkfuls of the dinner she’d missed earlier until she pleaded with me that she was full. I, of course, insisted on one last bite, which she complied with. And when it was well beyond into the night, our bodies both spent and satisfied, Jaden curled up in her favorite little nook against my shoulder and side and closed her eyes for the night, releasing a sleepy sigh as she finally drifted off to sleep. For once, it wasn’t about asserting my dominance to ensure she

knew her place. It was just about pleasing her, and that made me feel oddly... invigorated.

It gave me hope that she could become more than just complacent; she had the potential to become happy. But I'd have to give her that happiness.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't agree with Jaden's little test over me. I was bored with her compliance. I enjoyed her resistance too much to beat it out of her completely. All I really wanted from her was to fear and obey me when I needed her to, fight me when I wanted her to, and love me with the same fierceness I shared for her. Would I admit that to her now? No—wanted her to gain a better understanding of what it meant to be obedient, to be mine. No more playing games.

She was lying if she thought she didn't miss the fight either. She could deny it all she wanted, but her fear of me turned her on... because she knew what I would do to her, and today only reaffirmed that. She wanted the push just as much as I wanted to give it. I had a feeling she'd soon create it herself just so I had a reason to punish her. Whether it was done unconsciously or deliberately, she'd pull something that would warrant a fight, like today.

The therapy session had been a test to see how close she was to acting out, how deep into her submission she thought she really was, and what she really wanted from me besides her goddamn freedom.

The hardest thing to break her of was the desire to escape. She still saw her life with me as only temporary; that she would one day be free of me and this would all be over. Her determination and will to beat me was much stronger than I gave her credit for. I needed to give her a better reason to stay, to actually want to stay. Threatening her family wasn't enough, granting them mercy wasn't enough, and I'd already given her plenty of reasons to hate me. I needed to find a way to reverse that heated passion into something else and give her a reason to want me, to love me.

Stockholm syndrome was bullshit. Since when could anyone tell you who you could and couldn't love? Just because people put a label on falling for your kidnapper didn't mean it had to be a bad thing. Stockholm syndrome was just a survival tactic for the mind, adapting to the situation by lessening the threat and identifying with the captor. Yes, it occurred through trauma, but forming a bond with Jaden during that delicate phase would ensure her loyalty to me. I didn't give a shit that Stockholm

syndrome carried a negative connotation. That didn't make it any less real. And I'd make damn sure it was as real as it could fucking get.

My fingertips drew lazy circles around Jaden's shoulder blade as my mind drifted back to the last thing she'd said before she bolted from her therapy session.

Just like it worked out for Darren's mother?

I'd revealed too much. She'd use that information as a shovel to dig for more. She'd want the full story about the death of my mother and what it cost my father, what it cost me. She'd have to earn her right to that privilege, but still, it bothered me that she worried. She likely had a misguided opinion about my mother, and I'd have to fix that. I wouldn't allow her to form a biased opinion on something she knew nothing about, something she would probably never understand. But then again, maybe if I told her what happened, she might have a better understanding of why I kept her under lock and key so tight. Either that or she'd never want to leave the safety of the estate again.

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24

CHANGE



Something had changed in Darren. I didn't know what caused it, but I suddenly gained a little more freedom. I could now walk in the woods, and I could do it without the watch of my guards. I was only allowed an hour every day, and if I were a second late from emerging from the trees, it would be taken away. I was so grateful for his "gift" to me that I'd thanked him myself without prompt the entire morning. He seemed to appreciate the rewards of his generosity as well while I found it odd that I could reward him so easily for one good deed after six months of bullshit. But it was my method of survival. If I showed him how happy I was when he treated me well, then I hoped he would favor the response and do it more often. If he could condition me, then I would do the same with him.

I did find it odd that he never brought up the conversation I'd had with Sid—the one I knew he'd been listening in on. Maybe he didn't want to admit that I was right. That he didn't want me obedient all the time, and that he wanted me to fight him. That he missed it. But he never budged, not even at the idea of his mother, and what I obviously thought of her and how she handled her situation with his father.

I had to wonder if it wasn't smarter that she had persuaded Darren's father to purchase her rather than someone she knew nothing about, someone who might take pleasure in simply killing her instead of someone who took pleasure in simply having her. Had Darren's father loved her?

Had he cared about her? I hadn't even thought to ask of his demise. Had he been killed, too? Does anyone die of old age in this life?

I wanted to understand more of the world Darren lived in and the rules that governed it. But I didn't know how much information he would share with me. He still liked to keep me in the dark with just about everything. I think he liked me blissfully ignorant of the darkness he dealt with every day, but at times, it was hard not to see it reflected in him. I'd notice on certain days he'd come home with blood on his shirt, smelling like gunpowder and completely bury himself deep inside me like it was his fucking sanctuary. And afterward, he'd shower all the death off the both of us, carry my exhausted ass to bed, and tuck me into his side for the rest of the night.

I still hated the man with every fiber of my being, but when the rare moments came that he was gentle and almost loving, I couldn't stop myself from diving headfirst into the comfort he provided me. He was always so stern, intense and brooding, yet somehow, he was still capable of leaving it all at the bedroom door and showing me a softer side that existed only for me. Of course, that was only when he felt like it and if I deserved it.

Before he'd left for the day, he gave me one of his Rolexes so I would know when my hour was up in the woods. The damn thing was so big; it fit around my fucking forearm, not to mention it felt like a damn weight strapped to my arm. I tried to reason with him that I would likely lose it, but he warned me of the consequences if that happened. He promised to replace it with my own at dinner.

That day, I'd spent most of my time outside, jogging in the water and walking back waist deep as I had with Holly. Every moment I spent training, I couldn't help but think of her and remember how pissed off I still was at her death. It shouldn't have happened. I should have done better at keeping her safe from Darren's suspicions. She might have annoyed the hell out of me, but she got me back on my feet, and she didn't deserve to die.

When I decided to venture out into the trees, I made sure Darren's stupid watch was wedged tightly against the muscle of my forearm before I left Clive and Owen on the patio. It was 12:30 p.m., so I had to be back by 1:30 p.m.

I jogged through the trees, observing every single thing I could of the landscaping. I passed the hammock and small stream Darren had brought me to so long ago, the memory of him pushing for info about my dad

suddenly pissing me off as I strolled past. Eventually, I finally came to the clearing and found a nice shady spot where I could sit. Closing my eyes, I quieted my mind and meditated for a while. It was hard to meditate in that house when so much darkness and cruelty surrounded me. I was glad Darren was giving me a reprieve from it all.

Once I felt clarified, I removed Darren's watch, carefully placing it in a spot against a tree, and practiced some yoga, working on my handstands and advanced poses. I couldn't practice with the giant clunky thing dangling from my wrist. The fact that the ground was grassy and extremely uneven made it more difficult, and I liked the challenge in that. I moved on to practice my advanced spinning and jump kicks, trying my best to get them higher and higher every time.

Needing a break from the exertion, I took a walk, purposefully heading to the fox's den to see if they were there. Creeping up to the tree, I carefully peered around it, only to be flooded by disappointment. Not even a peep. Maybe they were sleeping in the den. Turning back around, I sat on the ground and slumped against the tree, but when I finally raised my head, my stomach dropped.

The mother fox was staring right at me no more than ten feet away from where I sat. Remaining as still as possible, my eyes scanned every inch of her, recognizing her posture as non-aggressive but still cautious. She stood to her full height—her ears forward, tail down, and her eyes right on me. I tried to relax, making myself as least threatening as possible and hoping I wouldn't have to hurt her if she attacked. Darren would kick my ass if a wild animal hurt me out here, and then he'd probably never allow me back out.

After a few minutes of staring, she moved closer to me, her nose leading the way as she sniffed the air. Step after hesitant step, she made her way to me, and I regretted letting her get as close as she did. If I got bit, there would be hell to pay.

No more than a foot away from me, she continued to sniff, her jaws opening to breathe me in and allowing me to catch the remnants of her sharp little teeth. I thought about maybe scaring her away, but then she might retaliate to protect her kits, and I'd still end up with a bite mark. So I remained as still as ever, trying to keep my heart calm. But then the small cry of something behind me drew her attention, and she quickly scampered away. I released a breath of relief and turned around the tree to see her usher

a stray kit back inside her burrow. Hopefully, now that she had my scent, she wouldn't see me as much of a threat anymore.

Reaching up to flick my stray hair back, I suddenly noticed it lacked a certain weight. My stomach immediately twisted in knots as I realized I'd left Darren's watch by the tree in the clearing... and I had no idea what time it was. Jumping up, I dashed through the trees as fast as I could until I finally came to the clearing and saw the shiny silver Rolex dead ahead. My heart pumping like crazy, I snatched up the hunk of metal and looked for the time. 1:28 p.m.

"Shit!"

Wrapping my hand around the metal band, I raced through the clearing and back into the trees. I was at least ten minutes away from the house, but if I ran fast enough, I might just make it in time. I worked my legs like pistons, pushing them as quickly as they could, jumping over stray branches and hoping like fuck I didn't tear my clothes in my haste.

Glancing down at the watch, I had about five seconds left before that timer would go off, and I'd be fucked. I pushed harder, leaping my way over the stream as I passed the hammock, finally back on the trail. The entrance was about a hundred yards away when the timer went off, announcing the shit day I was going to endure for the rest of the afternoon.

On a growl, I kicked it up one final notch and blasted my way through the trail and finally shot of the woods. As soon as I hit the grass, my eyes landed on the estate to find Clive and Owen standing on the edge of the patio. Owen lifted his watch to his mouth before the two of them descended down the slope of the grassy hill, heading for me.

I rolled my eyes and slumped to the ground as I fought to catch my breath and calm my heartbeat. I felt like I was going to pass out from the terror and exertion. Bad combination.

When the two of them finally reached me, they looked down with disappointed smirks and shook their heads.

"You're late, Miss Jaden," Clive said, amused.

I looked at the watch still clutched in my hand.

"By three minutes," I huffed between breaths.

"Three seconds or three minutes makes no difference to Mr. Davis," Owen added.

Right. I'd forgotten about his severe detest for tardiness.

"You guys gonna spank me now? Or do I have to face the corner until he gets home?"

They repressed their sighs through their noses and reached down to haul me to my feet.

"Let's go, Miss Jaden," Clive said, escorting me back to the house while Owen grasped my other arm.

"You can let go now. I'll be a good girl," I growled at them, yanking my arms free of their grasp. They let go without issue.

I was shunned to my room for the rest of the day, which was fine since I was about ready for a nap anyway.

When it was time for dinner, I was escorted down to the dining room and waited for Darren to arrive, which he did after about five minutes.

He kissed my temple when he arrived, and I couldn't help but clench my jaw in fear. "How was your day?" he asked as he sat down.

"Good," I replied, making an effort at some pleasant conversation, hoping he would ignore the giant pink elephant I knew he was waiting to address. "Yours?"

"Successful," he said happily as he placed his folded hands on the table, leaning toward me. I nodded and turned my eyes toward the window. I heard him take a breath. "I understand you were late coming back from the woods today."

I scoffed. "Did my tattletales tell you that?"

Darren's eyes darkened. "They didn't need to. Your cuffs have been modified to register your heart rate, body temperature, exercise and sleep patterns. Your heart rate spiked at 1:25 p.m. and then again three minutes later."

I sighed, annoyed at his obsessive stalker tendencies, and placed my face in my hands. "I accidentally left your bowling ball of a watch by a tree while I practiced some yoga. Afterward, I went for a walk, and several minutes later, I suddenly realized a ten-pound weight was missing from my wrist, then immediately ran back to retrieve it and found out it was 1:28 p.m. I ran back as fast as I could. I'm sorry; please don't be mad at me."

He sighed, just as annoyed as I was, and slid his chair back. "Come here."

I groaned, wincing back my irritation. I'd known this was going to happen. On a deep breath, I stood from my chair and took the two short steps toward him. Grabbing my arm, he swiftly pulled me over his lap and

hauled my dress up, exposing my bare ass. I didn't even fight him. Just gritted my teeth and dug my fingernails into the rug below as my hair fell over my face and onto the floor.

"I was lenient with you yesterday, practically rewarding you for your disregard for my rules. And now, when I've granted you more freedom against my better judgment, you prove me right and defy me."

"It was three minutes!" I shouted in my defense.

The first strike was quick, the pain of his palm spreading over my cheek and causing me to gasp.

"I don't care!" he roared down at me, and I immediately flinched, the sound of his angry raised voice absolutely terrifying. "You know what is expected of you. Deviate and I will be there to put you back in line. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Darren," I murmured. My monster had returned.

Do not cry. Don't you dare fucking cry.

"Count."

His hand came down again, and the burn on my cheek matched the burn in my throat from holding back my tears.

"One," I mumbled, the cheeks on my face burning with just as much humiliation as the ones raised over his lap.

His hand came down, over and over again, the humiliation searing into my ass as he beat me back into submission. When he was done with his ten and my ass thoroughly reddened, he yanked me back up to straddle him over the chair. My hands laid limp at my sides while Darren glared up at my face. I knew it was red from hanging nearly upside down bent over his knees and though my eyes were wet, not a single tear had dropped.

"Now kiss me," he ordered.

On instinct to obey his command, I licked my lips and bent down slightly to give him what he wanted without a second thought. He'd trained me so well. The moment our lips touched, his hands gripped my hips, holding me still as he took what he wanted while I combatted with my own aggression. My hands shifted from my sides to find themselves clutching his massive shoulders, deepening the kiss and pulling him closer.

Instead of lingering on the spanking he just gave me, the one that left my insides dripping with heat and my mind solid with degradation, I dove deep into the memories of last night. His tenderness, affection, and the undivided attention he gave to my body was enough to make me forget all

the horrible things he'd done to me... but only because I allowed myself to forget. Even though he could create such pain and shower me with such cruelty, he was still capable of kindness, a world of promised pleasure at his fingertips if I obeyed him. I wanted to see more of it. I'd grown accustomed to his possessive primal glare, but I wanted to find the adoration I saw in his eyes last night.

On a growl, he broke the kiss, lifted me up, and knocked everything off the table with one sweep of his arm. Slammering me down where his empty plate had just been, he replaced his absent meal with my body, shoving my dress up and ripping my thong from my hips. Forcing my legs apart, Darren thrust his tongue into my already slick pussy and devoured me like I was the goddamn main course. All fucks aside, I moaned in ecstasy, relishing the soft wet strokes of his masterful tongue over my clit. Fuck, I could barely breathe; it felt so good.

Gasping, moaning, my body shuddered with such pleasure, and I came before I even knew I was ready. The orgasm ruptured through me like an atomic bomb, electrifying every nerve in my body, blood rushing so fast my head spun. Before I even had a chance to calm down from the high, Darren was already inside me, and I jerked from the force of his initial thrust. I was still sore from the night before, but I didn't care. I felt alive. With each thrust of Darren's cock, my burning ass rubbed against the table, allowing the pain to give me a new type of sensation, and fuck if I didn't want more of it.

My hands curled around Darren's biceps, attempting to hold myself still, but his hands immediately pulled them away, pinning both my wrists at either side of my head. He rammed into me with the force of a madman, over and over again, forcing the second orgasm to flutter into something that couldn't be anything less than magic. Darren groaned in his own release, shooting hot jets of his cum inside me while my core milked him for every drop. Battling for breath and with Darren hunched over me, his nose rubbing into my neck, I focused on making the world spinning around me come to a standstill. I tested his restraint on my wrists, pushing up just a centimeter, but he would not give.

His nose traced up the side of my ear, slowly tickling me before he finally drawled, "Tell me what I want to hear."

I took in a sharp breath. "I belong to you."

"Good girl," he approved and pulled himself from me.

Fuck, that was a hell of a dinner.

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25

TRUST

That night, I gave Darren back his watch, and he presented me with one of my own. A white gold diamond encrusted Rolex to match my cuffs as if they were part of a set. Half the size of Darren's and much lighter, the face was Mother of Pearl, and even the hands had diamonds on them. It was fucking gorgeous, but I'd easily tarnish it within a week.

I was not allowed outside today, but if I could demonstrate my ability to tell time and switch my "activities" every hour, then I'd be granted access to the woods tomorrow, and Darren would accompany me this one time so he could determine if he was comfortable with me being out there alone. I swear it was as if I was a fragile child in his eyes. A helpless child who could shoot guns, ride superbikes at high speeds, and beat the shit out of his guards. Yep, helpless child right here. I rolled my eyes at the thought but didn't argue with him. If it meant a moment away from the chaos that was my life, then I would compromise.

It was beyond difficult and annoying trying to find something new to do every hour. I ate, worked out, showered, and made myself look pretty, played pool, had lunch, watched half a movie, read, painted (begrudgingly), and then went back to my room to build myself a house of cards until dinner.

I was bored out of my fucking skull, yet at times, I just wanted to sit on my chaise or balcony to simply watch the world go by. I had a feeling one of the reasons Darren didn't want me sitting around was so I wouldn't be afforded the opportunity to sulk and drift back into negative thinking. In a way, he was right, but I would be plotting more than sulking.

Observation was my strong suit; attention to detail was crucial as a legal assistant, but I'd perfected it long ago when I was still training for my black belt. And now, trapped here, I'd use it to my advantage. I'd study the rotation of the guards, their shifts, the German Shepherds who followed certain guards on leashes, and the assault rifles they used. The FN SCAR was becoming increasingly popular among the military for an assault rifle, yet Darren's men seemed to have plenty to go around; some were even equipped with damn grenade launchers. It was like they were all prepared to go to war on the estate at any time. I wondered who was supplying Darren with such high-quality firearms, if he had a deal with someone or if he simply manufactured them himself.

Building the house of cards on my little white desk gave me the opportunity to appear focused on something as mundane as stacking cards on top of each other, but I was really building something else entirely—assumptions.

Assuming Darren relied on others to supply his kingdom with weapons, there was a chance that supply could run dry should the right connection become severed. He'd no longer have access to such steel protection, at least not illegally. And I also assumed his supply of ammunition ran the same way, potentially by the same supplier.

I assumed that every jar Darren had his fingers in required a connection, a business arrangement, a contract, and a person. Those persons needed to become targets, misrepresented targets. I needed to figure out a way to collect as much intel on Darren's people as possible, find out their connections, and eliminate their resources. Whether they were financial, social, or even political, every last thread that tied Darren to his resources needed to be severed. I just didn't know how the fuck I was going to accomplish that, considering how discreet Darren was around me.

The only thing that didn't require an assumption was Darren's obsession over me. I didn't get it. I thought I was more trouble than I was worth, but he was obviously confident in his ability to break me in and ensure my obedience. In a way, it was working because I needed him to trust me again. I needed to get him to let down his guard, but I knew that would take years to accomplish, and I didn't know if I had years in me.

Sitting back in my chair to admire my masterpiece, I took a good look at the triple decker card castle, reflecting on each card and how they all held a purpose. They all leaned on each other, and without one, the rest would fall.

I somehow doubted Darren's empire resembled the same fragileness of a card house, but like any structure, if the foundation cracked, the whole thing would crumble. A simple flick of the bottom middle card and the entire house fell to a scattered mess in the blink of an eye. I hoped it would be that quick.

The following day, Darren worked from home, and since I was successful at my hourly activities schedule, he assured me we would walk through the woods together after my lunch. I was a little reluctant, afraid he might find some reason to keep me from the trees, or that he would be looking for a reason. I had to express the importance of this to him; that if he wanted me mentally healthy, I needed a moment of fucking peace.

After my lunch, I paced in front of the back door as I waited for Darren. Dressed in my pink Nikes, white skort, and black tank top, I was beginning to think I'd wear my shoes out before he got here. I kept checking my new watch, watching the seconds tick by agonizingly slow. This was bullshit.

"Ugh, where is he?" I whined to my shadows, throwing my arms out dramatically.

"He'll be here soon, Miss Jaden," Owen replied. "He's handling something right now."

I wanted to break something. I loved how if I was three minutes late for something, I got an ass beating over his knee, but he could take his sweet ass time with whatever the fuck he wanted. I guess that was the highlight of being the boss. Stupid fucker.

An hour and a half later, Darren finally emerged, dressed in dark jeans and a dark maroon button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He didn't usually dress that casual, but when he did, fuck, it was sexy, especially when I could see his tattoos.

"Ready?" he asked me.

Snapping the book I had been reading closed, I rose from the couch, nonchalantly shoved the book in Clive's arms, and headed over to Darren. I tried hard not to glare at him for making me wait so long, but it was difficult to placate my foul attitude. Taking my hand in his, Darren led me outside, leaving Clive and Owen to watch from the windows.

The sun was bright and warm as we walked through the grass, but I couldn't help but feel a twinge of nervousness. I'd hoped this would go well; otherwise, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life.

Even though he kept me waiting, Darren's demeanor seemed light and carefree, though I knew his guard was still up. My hand still clutched in his, we walked past the hammock and stream, and I released a deep breath.

"Why are you so nervous?" he finally asked me, a smirk hiding in the corners of his mouth.

Goddammit.

I huffed again. "I'm afraid you'll find some bullshit reason to take this away from me."

"Mouth," he warned, tightening his grip on my hand. "And I will do whatever is necessary to make sure you're safe."

I scoffed. "This isn't about my safety. This is about your obsessive need to control everything concerning me, including the damn environment."

"And why do you think I need that control?" he asked me.

Good question.

I shrugged. "You tell me."

"Because it's *safer* that way, Jaden," he replied, halting us so he could stare down at me. "The more I can control, the more likely you will be safe."

"I thought we agreed that sheltering me was a bad idea."

"We never agreed to that. You will be prepared for any type of situation, but I will *shelter* you from any such potentially harmful situation as best I can." His tone was getting angry, and I didn't need that right now.

"Whatever. I don't want to argue. Just keep in mind this is important to me."

"That's a first," he replied snidely.

I rolled my eyes and suddenly found my arm yanked, my body following while Darren's palm struck my ass with a quick hard slap.

"I saw that," he admonished.

I wanted to roll my eyes again but thought better of it.

"What is it that you do out here?" Darren asked me a few minutes later as we kept on the trail.

"Find ways to make peace with my life," I replied darkly.

"Oh? By doing what?"

"By enjoying what little freedoms I have been granted, however long they may last."

Darren sighed. "You're really expecting me to take this away from you."

“I have learned to always expect the worse with you... so yes.”

“You only have yourself to blame for that. If you’d listened to me months ago and settled, you’d be in a much happier state of mind.”

“I disagree, but then again what do I know? I’m just a worthless whore with a tight hole to fuck.”

Darren yanked me toward him, locking me against his chest and nearly snarling down at me.

“The man who uttered those words to you is dead because of them. So what makes you think I will tolerate them when they leave your mouth?”

“Because he was right,” I snapped bitterly. “The only thing that validates my life is you, and I hate you for it! I fucking hate—”

Before I could finish my rant, Darren tugged me closer and kissed me with such force, I nearly lost my breath. His mouth was soft against mine yet firm in its mission to distract me. Darren’s hands gripped my hips, not giving me an inch to move while my hands remained planted on his wide chest, my blood rushing through my veins while my stomach knotted with demonic little butterflies.

Releasing me from his kiss, his forehead lingered against mine while I fought to find my breath.

“You can hate me all you want; it won’t change anything. But you are not ever to hate yourself. You are worth more to me than my own fucking life, so don’t pretend for a second that the opinion of a dead foot soldier measures your worth. He was wrong.”

I blinked. It was the only thing I could do to respond to what he had just said. The intensity of his eyes told me how serious he was and that I should probably shut up about it.

“Now, I never want to hear you say shit like that again. Do you understand me?”

I pursed my lips in rebellion. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” he snapped.

“Yes, Darren.”

“Good. Come on.”

The argument and kiss long forgotten, Darren strolled the woods with me. I showed him the clearing where I practiced yoga and meditation. I even showed him the tree where I’d forgotten his watch. Throughout the entire tour, I prayed like hell my little fox family wouldn’t make themselves known. I knew that would probably be the end of them. I kept my eyes

peeled for anything gray in hopes I could distract Darren into looking the opposite way, but it was difficult with how observant he was.

His eyes scanned every direction, every rodent that moved, every bird that flew by, and every branch that swung in my direction. I kept catching his eyes glancing up for several seconds at the trees as we passed them—probably wondering where he could hide the security cameras he was probably going to install so he could watch me from afar.

“This can’t be all you do out here,” he suddenly said, sounding irritated. “Even I would find myself bored after a while.”

He was looking for a reason! Goddamn snoop!

“Not when you’re only allowed an hour,” I retorted. “It goes by faster than you think.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “There’s something missing. Something you’re not sharing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’ve circled the entire area.”

“Your eyes keep whipping in every direction like you’re waiting for something to show up and you don’t want me to see it. You also keep purposely avoiding a certain area. I want to know why.”

Shit, he was good. I was avoiding the fox den like the plague, slowly directing him away from it as best I could and hoping to God one of those fuzzy little fuckers didn’t show their face right now. I was afraid that if I showed him, he’d see them as a threat and exterminate them. Maybe I could distract him with another argument?

“And your eyes keep wandering to every damn tree like you’re wondering if it’s a good place to hide a camera,” I retorted.

“Jaden, you’d better show me what you’re hiding right now, or you won’t be coming back out here. End of story,” he threatened.

My lips tightened in frustration before I finally sighed in defeat.

“All right, fine, but I’m trusting you not to ruin this. It makes me happy to see them.”

“Them?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Come on,” I said, this time being the one to tug him along.

I led Darren toward the den, hoping the foxes wouldn’t be out, but of course, I could hear the little yaps and growling of the kits. When we were about ten feet from the tree I normally hid behind, I slowed our pace.

“You have to be really quiet, or you’ll scare them,” I said, looking up at Darren with a pleading look. He returned a very unsettled suspicious one.

“Don’t be mad,” I pressed, emphasizing my puppy dog eyes.

Taking his hand, I pulled him into a crouching position behind a nearby bush and pointed toward the den. The kits were playing all over the place, jumping on broken tree stumps, clawing and snapping at each other while the mother finished snacking on the remains of another dead rabbit. “See? Aren’t they cute?” I said softly, hoping like fuck he thought the same thing.

“Son of a bitch,” Darren whispered under his breath, his agitation becoming clear as he rose to get a better look.

I immediately latched on to his forearm to pull him back down. “Darren, please. I’m trusting you, remember?” I whispered a little too loudly. The scowl that he returned was enough to make me withdraw my hands as if I was backing away from a snarling animal. I sat back in the bushes in a huff, knowing it was over and he was going to ruin everything. Again. Glancing up, Darren’s face contorted in anger as he watched the little foxes play. After a few moments, he released a heavy breath and sat down next to me.

“You’ve never tried to interact with them, have you? You don’t touch them?” he asked, that anger still fresh in his voice.

“No, Darren. I just sit here and watch them for a while.”

“Jaden, do not fuck with me on this,” he growled.

“I swear!” I replied, getting a little too defensive now.

Darren sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as his mouth creased into a thin line. When he seemed to calm down, he stood, grabbing my arm and taking me with him.

“Come on, let’s go. I’ve seen enough,” he said, pulling me along through the woods.

“Darren, I’m sorry. Look, I won’t go near them, just—”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that could have been for you?” he said sharply.

I scoffed. “I think I can handle a couple of little foxes, Darren. I don’t really view them as that dangerous.”

“Hence why you don’t get to make any decisions regarding your safety. They could have attacked you. They could have had rabies, for fuck’s sake.”

“They’re just foxes.”

“They’re wild animals. And wild animals will not hesitate to protect their young. You will stay out of the woods until I can figure out what to do

with them. End of discussion.”

I groaned aloud, not caring if he heard me or not. I recognized the tone in his voice—the one that told me to shut up and deal or find myself over his lap.

Darren led me out of the woods, his hand against my shoulder, pushing me along, and I tried hard not to let my agitation get the best of me. If he killed those foxes, I swore I’d take it out on his face.

When we reached the house, Darren left me with my guards and turned to leave, but I had to protect those foxes. I couldn’t let him walk away just yet.

“Darren, wait,” I pleaded, grabbing his forearm to stop him. “You’re not going to kill them, are you?”

He stared down at me, the intense anger in his eyes enough to make me regret my decision. Instead of answering me, he turned to my guards. “Take her upstairs,” he said to them and walked off, pulling away from my grip without a second glance.

I felt my mouth drop open in shock at his blatant dismissal as Clive and Owen each grabbed one of my arms and tugged me away from Darren and off toward the stairs.

“Darren, wait! Please don’t!” I shouted at his back as I was carted away on his orders, but he never answered. Clive and Owen had to practically drag me toward the stairs by the time I stopped fighting them and finally broke free of their grip.

“Fuck off me,” I snarled, shrugging them off as I huffed my way up the stairs and to my room. I slammed the door shut in their stupid faces.

Folding my arms across my chest, I paced my room. I was so fucking pissed I was ready to flip every piece of furniture over in my room. I knew he’d find a reason; I fucking knew it. I kept pacing until I decided I needed an outlet before I really did destroy something.

Changing into my workout clothes, I tightened up my Nikes and pulled the door open to find a very tall set of roadblocks. Clive and Owen were both standing in front of the door, their backs to me as they watched the hallway.

“Move. I’m going to work out,” I announced, hoping they’d take the hint.

“You’ve already had your workout today,” Clive replied without turning around.

“I don’t care. It’s what I want to do.”

“You haven’t been cleared access to go downstairs,” added Owen.

“Then fucking get it!” I shouted, ready to bulldoze the two of them down. I didn’t care how big or tall they were; I’d find a way around them.

Clive sighed as he said something into the Bluetooth that I couldn’t hear while I waited, impatiently shifting from one foot to the other. After a few moments, he finally spoke again. “You’ve been granted one hour, but—”

That was all the confirmation I needed to easily slip between the two of them and hurry my way over to the stairs, my feet pounding against each step as I made my way toward the gym. I didn’t bother to grab my wraps; I just quickly slipped on my gloves, the same ones from the island, and immediately slammed my fist into the first bag I saw.

Clive and Owen watched from a distance, one hand over the other in front of them while I beat the shit out of the bag. The chains suspending the bag clanked against each other as I kicked and punched until my arms and legs ached from exhaustion.

Turning away from the bag, I paced in front of it as I tried to catch my breath. A thin sheet of sweat already covered my body as adrenaline rushed through my veins. I kept my hands at my hips, eyes on the bag like predator and prey, waiting for my heart rate to slow before I went at it again.

“You should calm yourself, Miss Jaden.” Clive snickered. “We wouldn’t want you to break a nail.”

“I’m sorry, Clive, all I heard out of your mouth was you offering to trade places with my punching bag,” I snapped.

A smirk formed on both their lips, and I wanted nothing more than to punch it off their faces. “It is unwise to taunt the men tasked with protecting you,” Owen said smoothly.

I sneered back. “And it’s even more unwise to taunt me, considering what I did to my last bodyguard, or did you guys not hear about that?”

“What happened to Benito was his own foolish fault. And that decision was carried out by Mr. Davis, not you,” Clive defended.

“And who do you think reinforced that decision?” I replied coldly.

I could see them both becoming angry now. Good. I was glad to see I could get to them.

“If a flaw is discovered in a soldier of security, then it must be handled immediately. Whether you or Mr. Davis discovered that flaw makes no difference. It is an honor to protect that which matters most to our leader, a

job that will be done with absolute perfection. To be anything less would directly validate a severe form of disciplinary action to reinforce and ensure the understanding that the subject must be well protected always no matter the cost,” Clive said confidently.

I raised my brow. “No matter the cost?”

They both nodded.

“What if the cost was your own life?” I asked, wiping the dripping sweat from under my chin.

“Then we would gladly take the bullet,” Owned replied.

“Really,” I said, having a hard time believing them. “You both would die for me. You don’t even know me.”

“As I’ve stated before, it is an honor to protect that which matters most to our leader,” Clive repeated.

I turned back to the bag. “Honor.” I scoffed. “I didn’t know there was honor in working for a man who sells women as sex slaves.”

I took the rest of my heated rage out on the bag, slamming my fists and feet into it with everything I had. Inevitably, I was forced away from it and banished back to my room to prepare for dinner, which I ended up having alone. Shocker there.

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For the next two days, I was banished from going outdoors, forced to remain inside while I watched from the windows as different men in special uniforms came and went from the trees. I wanted to attack them. I wanted to stop them from interfering with the innocent animals I knew they were hurting. Clive and Owen tried to keep me away from the windows as often as they could, making sure I was preoccupied every minute to the point where I was exhausted by the end of the day. They wouldn't answer my questions as to whether the animals were being exterminated or simply relocated, and it was killing me.

Darren was smart to stay away from me for those two days. It would have been nothing but fighting, but apparently, he was away on business. How convenient. He didn't even tell me that he was leaving, but then again, I didn't really care that he hadn't. I hoped he fucking died.

It was the weekend before I could finally go back outside, but only when Darren was home and chose the time. I'd been reading in my room when Clive told me I'd been given the go-ahead for my woodland walks, and I immediately jumped to my feet. I power walked my ass all the way down the stairs and to the back door, trying not to seem too anxious as I almost ran into the woods as soon as I was on the grass.

Safely behind the shade of the trees, I took off at a dead run, heading straight for the fox's den. My lungs burned in my chest as I pumped my legs through the woods, hope driving me forward that my furry little friends were still alive. Reaching the den, I came to a quick stop at the tree I hid behind and peered around to instantly hunch in disappointment as I looked

over the now destroyed den. Stomped out completely, nothing was left of the little burrow, just a kicked-in mound of dirt and grass.

Slumping to the ground, I pulled my knees up to my chest to rest my cheek on top of my knees. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to release all my pent-up rage on Darren's stupid face with a spike covered baseball bat, but I knew only one of those options was available to me. Screaming would just bring my shadows to me and upset Darren, and the spike covered baseball bat wouldn't likely end well for me. After a few moments of self-pity, I wiped the dampness from my eyes and stood up. I needed a distraction, something to take my mind off the oppression that was my life.

Walking around for a while, I finally came across the perfect branch for a bo staff hanging low from a tree. No fucks given about Darren's rules, I climbed up the tree, jumped to the branch, and pulled it down as hard as I could until it snapped. I landed on my feet easily and pulled the remaining pieces of the branch from the tree. It was a little heavy, which was perfect, as was the length. Pulling each of the smaller branches off, I worked the branch until it became one single long stick. But it was still uneven.

Leaning the branch against the tree, I made my way over to the stream and scanned the water for the perfect rock. I had to walk up and down the stream for a while before I caught my foot on the edge of a sharp rock, scratching my ankle. Bingo. Bending down and ignoring the scrape on my skin, I wedged the rock from the muddy bank, pushing and pulling it as best I could until the mud finally released my target. The rock was a lot bigger than I thought it was. Like plucking a damn iceberg from water, it was much bigger at the bottom than I thought. But I was strong, and I carried that heavy bitch all the way back to a good hiding spot so that I wouldn't have to worry about someone sneaking up on me.

Grabbing my branch, I whittled it over the sharp edge of the rock until the broken nubs of the smaller branches were gone, and it was nothing but a smooth, broad staff. The ends were still fucked up, but over time, I could whittle the ends to a point, but I was low on time as it was.

With only about twenty minutes left, I made my way to the middle of the clearing and tested my makeshift bo staff out. The aerodynamics were off, but the weight was good, heavier than usual, and flowed nicely in my hands. Heavier was better out here, considering it was excellent strength

training. Not to mention, the next time I got my hands on a real bo, it'd be a hell of a lot lighter, which meant I'd be a hell of a lot faster.

It was easy to lose myself in the bo. Twirling it in my hand and around my body, I forgot all about everything beyond that clearing. Meditation had nothing on this. This gave me something to do, something else to focus on instead of merely the sound of my own heartbeat and breaths. I loved the feel of the bo. Even if it was uneven and rough, it was the perfect distraction.

A few short minutes later, the timer on my watch went off, reminding me I only had five minutes left. I quickly found a good spot to hide the bo in the grass and jogged my way back to the estate, emerging from the trees right on time. I found Clive and Owen standing on the patio waiting for me, and I didn't even bother to acknowledge them as I trudged past them and into the house.

A scowl immediately lit up on my face as I saw Darren standing near the hallway with Scott, signing some papers on a clipboard and discussing something. I didn't even hide my disgust as I walked past him, heading for my room.

"Jaden," he said, taking my forearm in his hand. He almost sounded apologetic.

"Fuck off," I snapped, swinging my arm out of his grip and continuing my pace.

I didn't make it very far before I was slammed up against the wall, Darren's hand ready to crush my throat at any moment.

"The fuck did you just say to me?" he growled, and I felt my entire body respond with heated fear and anger.

"What did you do with them?" I snarled back.

"With who?"

"My foxes! Did you kill them? You did, didn't you!"

His gaze went from intense to furious.

"What have I told you about making accusations?" he barked, his fingers squeezing around my neck for emphasis.

I winced at his voice, chewing on the inside of my cheek to avoid answering him. I knew where this was going.

"Answer me, Jaden," he warned, his voice turning deadly and convincing mine to quiet.

"Not to make them," I grumbled.

“That’s right, so stop trying to presume everything around you. Whatever it is you think you might know here, you’re wrong, so stop torturing yourself with assumptions. If there’s something you want to know, ask me.”

“Yeah, right! Like you don’t enjoy leaving me in the dark! For the first couple of months, you wouldn’t even tell me where we were until I finally found out for myself.”

“I said you could ask. I didn’t say I would answer.”

I scoffed, smothering a laugh at the back of my throat.

“But you’ll never know what information I will willingly give you until you ask,” he continued, that knowing shark grin playing at the corner of his lips.

“Fine,” I said, trying to calm myself down. “Please... tell me what did you do with the foxes?”

“Your foxes, along with all the other wild animals deemed threatening, have been relocated to a wildlife sanctuary where they can live in peace without the disturbance of humans.”

I could feel my eyes beginning to water as shock took over. He’d spared them. He had actually chosen life over death for the first time since I’d known him. I gulped back my anxiety, my dry throat burning with fear as I looked up at him.

“I didn’t know you were capable of administering mercy to innocent animals with no purpose,” I murmured cautiously.

His glare was absolute malice. “Believe it or not, I can be, and I did so to spare you the pain of knowing they were killed to keep you safe. It would have been a hell of a lot easier, but no, I let them live for you because I know it’s what you wanted. It was either you or them, Jaden, and I knew you wouldn’t have the heart to make that decision, so I made it for you so you can continue to safely enjoy the woods that you clearly love so much.”

I let my eyes slowly falter from his, too angry to hold them up anymore. I was so pissed, but I was even more pissed off because, in a way, he was right, and I didn’t want to admit that. I was thankful he had them relocated and not killed, and even more surprised he’d done it to keep me happy. And what made me even angrier was that I understood why he did what he did because if it had been my child out there, I would have probably done the same thing. The only difference was I wasn’t a fucking child, yet he kept protecting me like one.

Darren could see the turmoil rotating in my eyes and finally took back my attention.

“Now, I want an apology for your outburst, and then you’re going to thank me for not killing the foxes and providing you with a safe environment to make peace with your miserable life,” he growled.

I pursed my lips before blowing a piece of loose hair from my eyes. His hand was still wrapped around my throat, reminding me I wasn’t going anywhere until he got what he wanted, as per usual. Fucker.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” I said, biting into the back of my tongue to feel the sting. “And thank you.”

“For what?” he pushed, the intensity in his gaze growing.

I tried to suspend the huff I knew was ready to reveal itself and likely piss him off even more. “For not killing the foxes and providing me with a safe environment to make peace with my miserable life,” I grumbled.

“You’re fucking welcome,” he snarled. “Now, get your ass upstairs and wash up for dinner. I want you in heels tonight.”

I grimaced but didn’t argue. I bit my tongue instead until I was all the way upstairs and safely in my room, slamming the door behind me while Clive and Owen stayed outside.

I couldn’t believe how hard I’d lost that argument. Normally, I had valid points and could easily spar with Darren until he got fed up with my disobedience and silenced me for the night. His word was law but only because his laws made sense in his own twisted mind, but this time, for once, he actually had a valid point. Any wild animal was dangerous; I knew this, but all those foxes were just another taste of freedom I didn’t want to give back. I wanted interaction. I wanted the distraction, anything that could take my mind away from the hell I was living in. I was looking for ways to make my life tolerable... until I figured a way out of here. However the fuck long that would take.

After washing up for dinner, I changed into something nicer and pursed my lips when I tried to decide what stupid heels to wear. I didn’t typically wear them. They were uncomfortable and impractical. The only thing I liked about them was the fact that they gave me a few extra inches in height but big deal. I was still short as fuck. I decided on a nice compromise and selected a pair of lacey pink wedges to go with my light pink frilly strapless sundress. The floor-length mirror confirmed how ridiculous I looked. I

wanted my black Converse, skinny jeans, and my black leather jacket. I missed looking like me. Not this fake frilly bullshit.

When it was time, Clive and Owen escorted me down to the dining room, where Darren was already waiting, typing away on his smartphone. The moment I entered the room, his eyes immediately went to my feet to make sure I'd obeyed him. His brows furrowed with what was probably anger. I quickly sat down before he could linger on them for too long.

He finally sighed. "Jaden, what are you wearing?"

"It's called a compromise," I replied positively.

"A compromise?"

"Yes; they're heels, but they're much more comfortable than stilettos."

Darren's eyes narrowed at me. "Why don't you ever wear any of the heels I've provided you?"

I took a sip of my water before answering him. "Several reasons. One—because they're impractical and uncomfortable. Two—I prefer to be as stable around you as possible, and three—it's much safer for you."

He cocked an eyebrow. "How's that?"

I couldn't help but smirk. "Because I might be too tempted to stab you in the throat with the heel. Best to keep me away from temptations like that," I said plainly.

Darren regarded me for a moment before he tilted his head to the side and laughed. I loved how he found my violent side funny.

"You take the meaning of 'killer heels' literal, don't you?" He chuckled.

I shrugged. "The right ones can be dangerous. I once kicked a frat boy in the stomach for getting too touchy with me while wearing heels. He had to go to the hospital that night for stitches."

Darren positively grinned. "Impressive, but I think you know by now that killing me will only serve to make things much worse for you."

I waved him off. I'd heard this speech before. "Yes, yes, Mexico and all that. I know."

The idea should terrify me, but I didn't plan to kill Darren until I'd eliminated all my other smaller threats first; until no one was left to avenge his death. Then I would strike.

"You need to stop thinking like that," Darren said dismissively as our dinner was served.

I shot him a glance. I hadn't thought that out loud, had I? "Thinking like what?"

“Like you’re going to find a way out of this. That this isn’t permanent. Like you will successfully kill me one day.” His voice was dark, his eyes hooded by his brow, giving him a sinister look that made me shudder.

I returned his gaze with the same challenging fierceness. “Everybody dies, Darren. I’m just curious as to how long you think you’re going to survive *me* in all this.”

Darren suddenly seemed to relax, a tight smile forming in the corner of his lips. “You know; I can’t help but notice that you can’t seem to keep your game straight. One minute, you’re pulling for my trust, claiming to make peace with your life, and the next, you’re back to threatening me with your miscalculated ideas of revenge. You’re not very consistent with your plans, Jaden. You might want to work on that.”

I felt my fists curl until my knuckles turned white. Son of a bitch.

“Well, you could just let me go, and then we wouldn’t have to worry about the threats anymore,” I said through gritted teeth.

Darren chuckled. “Your threats are cute and oddly creative. I think I’d miss them.”

My nails began to dig into my palms, biting into my flesh and reminding me not to give in to his push.

Don’t give him the satisfaction.

“Well, you’ll have to get used to missing them at some point,” I retorted.

Darren laughed again as he took a bite of his dinner. “Careful, princess. Your fuse is showing. Don’t make me light it.”

There it was—my bait. And I fucking took it like a prized swordfish.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I would,” he said simply.

Bingo.

“And there’s the admission I was waiting for. How badly do you want to light that fuse, Darren? How bored are you with my constant robotic submission?”

“How bored are you?” he countered slyly.

I scoffed at his rebuttal question but quickly recovered. “This isn’t about me. It’s always been about you and what you want.”

“And I always get what I want, don’t I?”

“Until the day it finally backfires on you.”

Darren shook his head at me. “The longer you continue to tell yourself that, the harder it will continue to be for you,” he warned. “*Pretending* to be submissive isn’t helping you either.”

I rested my elbows on the table and leaned toward him, practically combat ready. “I’m just a little curious, Darren. In what universe do you think I’ll feel anything but absolute pure hatred for you? That I won’t fantasize about your death every minute of every day?”

Bait and hook.

“The same one where I spare your family,” he nearly growled. “The same one where I grant the ones you love mercy from a horrific and bloody future. One that you’d have to watch.”

I felt myself blanch at the truth in his words. He was sparing them for me, and I was pushing him.

“I do not care whether you love or hate me, Jaden. The only thing I care about is loyalty. I can ensure that through either money or fear, but since your loyalty is the only thing about you I can’t purchase, I will acquire it through fear. Money and fear both work the same way. I can spend more, or I can terrorize more. I told you things could always get worse. I have barely shared with you a glimpse of how dark my world is. Keep testing me, and you will find out very quickly what happens when someone crosses me.”

I stiffened, unable to move at his words while the feeling of defeat washed over me. I felt my eyes wander from his to the blankness in front of me. Goddamn him.

“You should consider the fact that if you continue to fight me and continue to hate me as much as you do, it will only eat you up inside. But if you let go, if you accept your life, if you learn to blur that thin line between love and hate, you might come to find yourself better off in a situation you cannot change. Stockholm syndrome doesn’t have to be all bad, Jaden. It’s just another form of survival; one I think you can appreciate, given the circumstances.”

Unable to contain the rage that shocked me like a lightning storm, I shot out of my chair and chucked my untouched plate across the room where it crashed into the wall, shattering ceramic and food all over the wall and floor. I glared down at Darren, a feral snarl on my face as I prepared to beat the fucking shit out of him.

“I will *never* love you,” I roared.

It was supposed to be the other way around. He was supposed to fall in love with me. It would be easier to manipulate him that way, get him to lower his guard and sympathize with me like I needed him to. If he thought I was going to succumb to some psychological bullshit to combat my traumatic life, then he was a bigger fool than I thought. I was beyond insulted that he thought me so weak minded.

Darren's shaded eyes never left mine as he slowly rose from his seat, his hands planted on the table as he towered over me; the intensity of his eyes reminded me I was about to experience a world of pain. His sheer size alone overwhelmed me, and I could feel my body wanting to cower while I tried to ignore the liquid heat beginning to collect between my legs. I hated how he had somehow conditioned my fear to turn me on, but I stood my ground, my clenched fists at my side as I glared back at him.

"You act like you have a choice in the matter." His voice was smooth, low, and laced with enough venom I could almost taste it.

"I always have a choice," I spat. "Consequences or not."

"Just like your body has a choice?" he sneered.

I snarled back at him, suddenly lost for my rebuttal. My body was different. It didn't know the difference between rape and consensual sex, but my heart certainly did. And I would never surrender that to him.

"You may have a degree in psychology, princess, but you've never seen firsthand how easy it is to warp the mind. And how much fun it can be. I've already conditioned your body to respond the way I want it to, and I have to tell you... it didn't take very long. I bet your fucking soaked right now."

"Oh, shut the fuck up!" I snapped. "You have no idea—"

Just when I thought things couldn't get any more intense, Darren casually cracked his neck in the middle of my little rant. Abruptly lifting the table, he ripped it out of his way, sending the heavy oak crashing to its side and shattering all of its contents to the floor. Panic electrified me as I flinched at his strength, and I couldn't help but find myself immediately backing away as he stormed toward me. My hands came up defensively, but Darren easily bypassed them, grabbed my throat, and shoved me into the wall, cornering me completely. Another gush of heat escaped.

I tried not to whimper, but the sight of seeing him flip that heavy table like it was nothing was enough to remind me that even though my body was strong, I was still very fragile in comparison to him and what he could do. He'd broken my body once before. He could do it again.

"Just who the FUCK do you think you're talking to, Jaden?" he growled down at me, his fingers squeezing just enough to remind me how vice-like they could be.

Fear consumed me. The adrenaline-fueled panic rushed through me in the wake of Darren's violent aggression, causing my body to shake and nearly crumple to the floor. I'd never been one to run from a fight, but right now, I wanted nothing more than to dissolve into a little ball on the floor and hide from him until the blazing intensity of his eyes finally left me.

But that wasn't me. I wasn't a coward, no matter how much I wanted to be. Some days, it was better to lie down and be a good girl but not every day. No. Not every day.

Not today.

"Answer me!" he roared.

I bit the inside of my cheek. "Apparently, no one," I said bitterly.

"You're goddamn right," he snarled. "Keep pushing me with that smart mouth of yours, and I'll have your jaw wired shut again."

I could feel my stomach drop in response to his threat, felt all the blood from my face drain out at the thought of having my jaw wired shut a second time. I could not handle that again. It was bad enough the first time.

"Do you understand me?"

Realizing I'd been clenching my jaw, I released it, noticing the tension leave my face to give him the answer he wanted.

"Yes, Darren."

"Who do you belong to, Jaden?" he asked me, his voice calm, his breathing even, but I couldn't ignore the warning in his voice if I didn't answer.

"You," I breathed.

"Who does this body belong to?" he asked, trailing the tip of his finger down the side of my face.

I was shaking; I was so fucking scared.

"You."

Darren moved closer, taking my earlobe between his teeth and biting down just enough to make me gasp. "And I'm going to show you exactly why this body is mine," he drawled, and then released me, taking several steps back.

"Run," he said, turning away to take off his suit jacket.

"What?"

Darren removed his tie and began to roll up his sleeves. “Run. As fast as you can, wherever you can. But chose your route wisely because wherever I catch you is where you’re getting fucked.”

I felt all the blood leave my face as my breath caught in my throat. He wanted to chase me, to hunt me down.

“And when I catch you, I’m going to remind you just exactly why that body is mine,” he said with a nod.

I felt myself take another step away from him.

“Now, run!” he barked, and I immediately took off like my life depended on it.

I rounded the corner of the first floor, quickly kicking off my useless wedges to run in my bare feet. I figured I'd have better luck if I stayed on the first floor, rather than wasting time running up the stairs and limiting my options of escape.

My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I zipped through the house, and I wondered how much of a head start Darren was going to give me. I didn't have to ponder long because not more than a few seconds later, I heard the quick paces of his feet thundering through the house behind me.

Shit!

Thank fuck the house was like a maze. With so many halls and rooms, it was easy to keep the chase going, but I didn't know how much longer I had before he found me. He wasn't behind me, but I could still hear the running somewhere throughout the house.

Rounding another corner, I stopped for a moment to hide and catch my breath. That was when I noticed his footsteps had stopped as well. Fuck, he was listening for me. I didn't know if I wanted him to find me since I knew exactly what would happen. It would be hard and rough, and I'd likely still feel it in the morning. Maybe if I could draw the chase out long enough and hide somewhere, he'd give up?

Don't be a fucking idiot, Jaden. Just figure out where you want him to fuck you.

Good point. My room was probably best since I could just curl up on my bed afterward and go to sleep. I'd probably need it.

Settled on my plan, I tiptoed out of the room I'd been hiding in and poked my head out into the hallway. The coast was clear. On quick feet, I made my way through the hallway, heading back toward the stairs, my heart practically beating out of my chest. But as I came around the next corner to the stairs, I came face to face with my hunter. My heart nearly stopped.

Gasping in shock, I made a quick beeline back the way I came, but Darren was already on my heels, wearing a dark, sinister look on his face. He was looking for his conquest, and he was about to have it.

Sprinting into the closest room, I slammed the door shut and locked it right before Darren had a chance to catch me. Fighting for breath, I backed away from the door, clutching my midsection as I waited for the inevitable. One solid kick was all it took for Darren to bulldoze the door down and storm his way through what was left of the doorframe toward me.

Sheer panic enveloped me as I turned to run from him again, but he was quick this time. Grabbing my arm, he yanked me toward him, his other arm reaching around my middle and lifting me to his chest. Flight was over. Time to fight.

Withstanding the terror vibrating in my limbs, I turned my whole body into the elbow I attempted to throw in his face, but his hand came up to block it and wrap around my arm to trap it behind my back. With my position now restricted, my other arm didn't have much reach, but it didn't matter much anyway because, in a matter of seconds, my face was shoved into the mattress.

I tried to turn, tried to scramble from the bed, tried to get just a single bit of my bearings back, but Darren wasn't giving me an inch to fight. My breathing erratic and shallow, I came to terms with the fact I'd been caught and began to mentally prepare myself for what was coming next. It didn't matter much, though. I was wetter than Niagara Falls down there.

My clothes were ripped from my body; Darren's fist in my hair, he jerked my head up while the other hand went for his zipper, and he quickly entered me from behind. The force made me cry out in pain and absolute fucking bliss. His cock stroked every inch of my core, knowing exactly where I liked it as though he had written the goddamn manual. I couldn't stop the moans and cries as I gave up my fight and let him have his way. Because as deep as my denial went, I loved being taken by him like this. The indisputable raw passion, obsession, and lust that manifested at these

moments took me to a place I was unfamiliar with, a place I found myself eager to explore and conquer. Because it felt like salvation when I did.

My nails bit into Darren's shoulders until my knuckles turned white. His groans of pleasure ringing in my ears as he took me over and over again reminded me of how much he loved it, too. A sharp smack came across my ass, and I screamed, wanting to move my head, but Darren only yanked my hair harder. A few hard strokes later, Darren flipped me onto my back, wasting no time as he entered me to pin my wrists above my head. And that was when he found the spot, and I nearly howled from how good it felt. I hated the man, but he could fuck like a goddamn Olympian. I guess you learned a lot when you had so much expendable pussy on hand.

"Wrap your legs around me," he ordered. I complied without hesitation, allowing him to drive even deeper than before.

"Oh, my God!" I screamed, needing and wanting every single inch of him I could get.

"Fuck, you're soaked," Darren groaned, his grip on me tightening. "Do you feel that, Jaden? Do you feel how much your pussy loves this?"

God, I did. His cock filled me completely, pushing beyond the limits of my walls and stretching me to the brink. It wasn't much longer before a storm of an orgasm ruptured through me, sparking every nerve ending to life as wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me.

"That's my girl," Darren growled in approval. At least he was gentleman enough to let me come first.

Darren began to pump himself even harder, my breasts bouncing from so much force it became uncomfortable. After not much longer did he release a heady groan followed by hot jets of cum filling me before he collapsed on top of me. After a few moments of catching his breath, he finally rose up on his elbows and gazed down at me.

"You can deny it all you want, but your body knows who it belongs to. And eventually," he said, the tip of his forefinger pressing into the middle of my chest, "so will this."

"Never," I croaked, fighting back against the exhaustion of my adrenaline rush.

"It's inevitable. You're mine, Jaden. And one way or another, however long it takes, you'll succumb. Every. Single. Inch."

I shook my head on a scowl; raising my eyes to the ceiling to avoid his heated gaze, I was no longer interested in the argument. He was still lodged

inside me and still very hard. He hadn't softened one little bit, which meant I was in for a long night.

"Do not fight me," Darren ordered after a moment. He picked my dead weight off the bed, keeping himself inside me while he pulled me to his chest. "Wrap your legs around me and hold on."

Reluctantly, I did what he asked, and he proceeded to carry me out of the room and up the stairs to his bedroom where we continued to fuck well into the night until I finally passed out from exhaustion.

When I woke up, it was a little after two a.m., and Darren was nowhere to be found. Thank fuck. I needed a break from his dick and constant alpha male antics. Attempting to go back to sleep, I twisted and turned in the sheets, but my mind was too busy racing over the last few hours. My body might have been exhausted, but my mind was wide awake with worry and anxiety.

Surrendering, I rolled out of bed, not giving a fuck that I was still naked, and walked over to the windows. I didn't bother trying to leave the room. Wherever Darren put me for the night was where I was likely meant to stay. I didn't know what the fuck he could possibly be doing at this hour, but what did I care?

White iridescent light from the full moon flooded into the room, beckoning me to reveal myself in it. I sat down on the carpeted floor just outside the window, completely encompassed by the moon's glow and stared off into the world I was barred from.

The view was beyond beautiful. With the ocean off in the distance, the light of the moon reflected off the water while the stars twinkled above, and it was nearly a perfect night. I found myself wanting to go down to the beach and walk the night waves, but I knew that wasn't happening.

I tried to ignore it, but my mind kept going back to the sharp words I'd shared with Darren. I'd never thought I knew the monster so well until he revealed how he'd planned to exploit my trauma into something he thought would benefit him. That I would succumb to my distress and break, allowing him to claim the loyalty he wanted so badly from me.

Even the idea of *pretending* to love him to get him to trust me was enough to make me vomit. I couldn't keep that charade up even if my life depended on it... and it sort of did. I could not look at him with adoration or feel anything but absolute hatred and disgust. I had no idea how long I would have to fake that shit, and I didn't think I had it in me to keep it

going. He'd figure it out eventually, and I didn't want to think of what he would do if he thought I was lying about something as important as that.

Getting him to love me would be easier, but that didn't mean he would automatically trust me. I just wanted his sympathy, but who knew if that was even guaranteed? He might be even more resentful because I didn't reciprocate his feelings.

God, I just wanted to give up. I didn't want to do this anymore. There was an obstacle at every turn, and I had no idea how many turns were in this fucked-up maze that was my life. I had nothing going for me—no purpose—other than to be fucked on a daily basis whenever and however Darren wanted me. That was no life. I needed more. If I was going to be here for as long as I was, then I needed something to hold on to, something that moved with me, not left me behind. But I didn't know what to ask for. And I didn't know if I would even get it.

It didn't take long for my tears to unconsciously roll down my cheeks, falling to my knees as I held on to myself. I tried counting the days of how long I'd been here, and I came to realize since that almost the end of July, it had been about five months. God, it felt like it was forever. It was December now; the weather changes were rolling in, and though it was only in the sixties in California, it was getting down to the thirties in Michigan. That also meant Christmas was around the corner somewhere. Fuck, I missed the snow this time of year. My family and I would usually go up north around this time and spend a whole weekend at Boyne Mountain, snowboarding until the sun went down. I'd race my brothers down the hills and occasionally let them win. Occasionally. I could never beat Jason, though. He'd been snowboarding since he was a kid.

I hated that my mind had brought him up, but with Christmas clearly around the corner, I couldn't help but think of him and our Christmas mornings. It was my favorite holiday. It meant I got to be surrounded by my family, basking in all the lights and colors, the food, music, and unexplainable magic in the air I felt whenever that time finally came back around again.

I couldn't imagine sharing my love of that magic with Darren. I didn't even know if he celebrated Christmas since he seemed to forget all about Thanksgiving. Maybe I should ask. Maybe I should forget about it. I was stuck between asking him to make my life less miserable to keeping it miserable so I would remember to hate him.

I would not fall in love with him. I majored in psychology, for fuck's sake. I would be able to decipher reality from fantasy. I was too strong to lose track of my ultimate goals. Even though most of the time I loved the way Darren fucked me when he wasn't punishing me, I still wasn't gone enough to know it was wrong. He was wrong — evil and callous. Whether I became his wife or the mother of his children, I was still a captive. Darren and Sid could try to twist the philosophy of it however they wanted, but if I wasn't allowed the choice to leave, I was a captive. End of. But I could choose what kind of captive to be; whether that was a cooperative captive or a rebellious captive, it was my choice.

But where would cooperation lead me? Right into the devil's arms.

To Darren, this would always be a game of wills. And if I wasn't careful, if I unconsciously gave in to my trauma and surrendered my internal fight from years of exhaustion, I'd never forgive myself. From the moment I'd first come into his ownership, it'd been nothing but manipulation. So far, I'd been able to withstand and counter, but I had a feeling his efforts were about to increase tenfold. I had to stay sharp, stay aware, and keep my heart guarded against the evils that sought to destroy me. I might have to bend to Darren's will, but I would not yield to my own.

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28

SNOW



My knuckles ached. After my night with Jaden, I still had too much energy to dispel, though I had no idea how. Fighting with her always put me on edge, and while I had to be somewhat gentle with her, it wasn't required for the scumbags who owed me money.

Every now and then, when I was in the mood, I'd handle the debtors myself and take whatever pent-up rage and violence I'd been harboring out on them. Some survived, some didn't. Some were never the same again. If they happened to have the money, I might just break a bone here or there for making me wait. Interest didn't have to be in the form of money. It could also be in blood. And it was always at my discretion.

Scott would sometimes have too much fun with them, to the point I would applaud his creativity. The more blood he spilled, the more satisfied he seemed. He was a sick son of a bitch, and I loved him for it. But tonight wasn't about blood loss; it was more of a blunt force trauma kind of night.

I'd cracked three skulls in the last hour, each one worth about ten grand in comparison to their gambling debts from the underground poker parties —money I didn't give a shit about. I'd made that in an hour alone. I didn't hide from my urges to create pain; I didn't deny myself the enjoyment of instilling fear in others and then reminding them of why they had good cause to be afraid. It was exhilarating. Choosing whether to grant life or death and then act out that choice was an experience to behold.

My father had always taught me about the importance of life—that it was important to give and important to take. When their purpose was gone, they no longer held value and instantly became a liability. We didn't deal with liabilities—we eliminated them without hesitation. You didn't leave the family simply because of this principle. You might be granted leave to retire past a certain age, but if you were called upon—no matter the reason—your loyalty remained unquestionable. No one ever wanted to become a liability, yet I had granted one exception. The only liability worth all the trouble.

By the time we got back to the house, and I was satisfied, I couldn't help but look forward to finding Jaden naked and asleep in my bed. I wanted to feel her soft skin against mine, her solid tiny frame in my arms while her glossy hair draped over my shoulder. She had the ability to calm and enrage me at the same time; it was a dangerous combination, but feeling her against me was one of the best feelings in the world.

So when I passed the guards standing post at my bedroom door and opened it to find her not in my bed, irritation and a small amount of panic set in because she wasn't where I expected her to be. My eyes quickly scanned the room until I found her sitting on the floor in the moonlight by the window. Her pale naked skin practically glowed in the light, making her look like something straight from Heaven. With her red hair draped down her bare back, the light of the moon changed the hue of the colors, making them darker, almost blood-like. Beautiful.

She didn't turn around as I entered, but I had a strong feeling she knew I was there since I noticed her go hands move to wipe her face as she sniffled. She'd been crying again. Regarding her carefully, I kicked off my shoes by the couch and removed my blood-stained t-shirt, not wanting to taint her perfect skin.

“You should be in bed,” I said as I approached her.

“Couldn't sleep.” Her voice was quiet, reserved, submissive. She wouldn't be fighting me much anymore tonight. I'd successfully extinguished those flames again.

I moved to stand over her, my hands in the pockets of my jeans as I smirked down at her. “I fucked you for nearly three hours. How can you not sleep?”

She scoffed. “Because my mind is stronger than my body,” she said.

And wasn't that the goddamn truth. Her mind was racing again. She was likely thinking thoughts she shouldn't be thinking, plotting, deliberating with herself about me and what to do with her life. She was still clinging to that resistance, and I was prepared for that fight, but sometimes, it pained me to know she was only making everything worse for herself.

On a drawn-out sigh, I sat down on the floor behind her, my legs stretched out on either side of hers and pulled her to my chest. She settled against me without protest, her chilled bare skin calming the heat in the center of my chest and warming hers.

"You're doing that thing again that you shouldn't be doing," I said softly in her ear, her hair tickling my jawline. My hands rested on my bent knees, effectively caging her body in mine, but she didn't react, just relaxed as best she could.

"Are you going to punish me for thinking about snow?" she asked quietly, sniffling again.

I furrowed my brows. "Snow?"

"Yes, snow."

"And why does snow have a place in your mind right now?"

"I was thinking about how much I miss it."

"Mmm," I said, resting my lips against her hair while my knuckles brushed over the skin of her arm. I didn't know if I liked where this conversation was going. "What brought this on?"

"It's Christmas next week," she announced.

"I know," I murmured against her skin, as if it was something I was supposed to care about.

We didn't often celebrate Christmas in my house after my father passed. He was the only one who pushed to get all of us together, and now that he was gone, my brothers and I just stuck to our own busy schedules. Dan celebrated with his wife's family, Dom partied in Vegas, and I was too busy running everything else to give a shit about a fucking holiday. I did give my staff one hell of a Christmas bonus, though. That was as festive as I got.

Since I'd missed Thanksgiving, I didn't think that I could potentially start my own holiday traditions with Jaden as Dan did with his wife, but it might do her some good to experience a little holiday fun. I was sure I could think of something to make her eyes sparkle. Especially if she missed the snow.

I could feel Jaden start to sink into me more and more, her sleepiness starting to take over again. Taking her in my arms, I lifted her up and carried her back to the bed without a single moan of protest. She was still awake, but I wanted to hold her closer. Gently laying her down in the bed, I removed my pants and crawled in, resting her cheek against my chest. She sighed sleepily, resting her hand on my abdomen while my fingers drew lazy circles on her shoulder. My other hand drew lines up and down her arm as it rested on my torso, lulling her to sleep. That was when she suddenly, but softly, wrapped her fingers around my wrist to pull my hand up for her to see.

Curious, I let her fingers continue their exploration, her small hands expanding my fingers to open my palm. She turned my hand around, exposing my raw and red knuckles. The darkness of the night shielded only what it could from the moonlight, but it wasn't enough. I could feel her face tighten as she focused on the remains of blood that dirtied my father's ring on my middle knuckle. Her thumb traced just below my knuckles, her touch soft and gentle, as though she were trying to avoid hurting me.

She sighed through her nose, acknowledging the damage I'd done tonight and dismissing it, as she should. When she turned my hand back over, her delicate fingers traced along the rough calluses of my palm, exploring every line of my hand as if she were trying to discover every terrible thing I'd done with them. I'd lost count of the lives these hands had taken years ago, the body count too many to recall.

Stretching her hand against mine, her fingers barely reached past my second set of knuckles and for some reason, I found myself curling my fingers over hers. That was when I allowed my hand to take over hers, tracing her lines and delicate features. Even though her hand was small, it was still capable of so much damage, so much fury. Being punched by her little fist felt like being stabbed with a baseball bat—small and concentrated but still painful as hell.

My fingers kept up their expedition until they came across some minor calluses beginning to form on the top of Jaden's palm, just below her fingers. My fingertips lingered on the tiny rough patterns, suddenly frowning in disapproval.

"You're getting calluses from all the weights you've been lifting," I said softly.

"Mmmhmm," she mumbled with a slight nod against my chest.

I didn't want her hands rough like mine. I wanted them soft and feminine, polished and pristine. But still capable of delivering a strong punch if she needed to.

"I'll get you some weight lifting gloves," I said.

"Mmkay," she said sleepily, her eyes finally closing while her fingers curled around mine.

I placed her hand back down onto my abdomen, my hand still clutching hers and loving everything I felt. That night I fell asleep dreaming of something I'd never seen before—Jaden's genuine smile. It was so rare to see, and I suddenly decided I wanted it more often.

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29

SURPRISE



The next day I was gifted with a surprise visit from Irina and Anya. I was so excited to see them my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. They couldn't understand my words, but they could translate through my body language.

Irina gave me a fresh new cut and blow out while Anya took care of my nails and toes. I was a little shocked to see she was painting my toes a shiny bright red with sparkly white tips, which wasn't my usual color. But what was even more suspicious was when she continued to paint my finger nails the same red color while giving my ring fingers an accent nail that resembled a candy cane. It was a cool design, and I praised her well for it.

I found it oddly intriguing that Anya had given me a Christmas-themed manicure and pedicure. Maybe Darren had been listening to me last night about the holidays, after all. Maybe I could ask for a small Christmas tree for my room or something. That would be nice, especially since no Christmas decorations adorned the house. If my iPod didn't have a calendar on it, I'd never know what day it was, and that would make things even more miserable than before.

It was weird having Clive and Owen present in the room while Anya and Irina worked. It made everything that much more uncomfortable, the anxiety in the room palpable. I felt like this was an overstep—another invasion of time that was precious to me. It was completely unnecessary, especially after Holly.

When I met Darren for dinner, I waited until he was finished eating, hoping that his satisfied palate would make for better negotiations. I finally got the nerve to speak up when I felt my plate had been diligently cleared enough and cleared my throat.

“Do Clive and Owen have to be present in my room when Anya and Irina are there?” I asked as nicely as possible.

“Yes,” Darren said without even looking at me, dismissing the question.

I grimace at him. “Why? I’m not going to do anything.”

“I know. And them being there is exactly why you won’t.”

I almost rolled my eyes. “Even if they weren’t there, I still wouldn’t do anything. I don’t need a repeat of what happened to Holly,” I said gravely.

“You’ve already admitted to me once that my absence makes you care less about my rules. And I’ve already stretched far enough on letting you roam the woods without your bodyguards as it is. That is as far as my trust in you will go.”

I pursed my lips. “Could they at least just stand outside my open bedroom door?” I tried to counter.

“No. Now, come on. I have a gift for you.”

I paled.

Oh, no. Not another “gift.”

The failed negotiations forgotten, Darren took me by my hand and led me over to the living room where a rectangular box, wrapped in red and gold wrapping paper and a big red bow sat on the coffee table. Setting me down on the couch, Darren placed the present on my lap and sat down across from me.

“Open it,” he said with a nod.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I carefully opened the present; gently tearing off the paper and crumpling it into a ball to make the least amount of mess as possible, I finally opened the box. Pushing aside the white tissue paper, my hands encountered soft black fabric.

Oh, God. Please no lingerie...

Lifting the material in front of my face, I came to realize it was a single pair of black leggings. Confused, I felt the thick cloth in my hands noticing they were fleece lined. There was no way I’d need to wear fleece-lined leggings here, especially since I wasn’t technically allowed to wear pants... so what the fuck were these for?

“Fleece-lined leggings?” I asked him, cocking an eyebrow in question. “I thought these were on the blacklist?”

“I figured you might need them,” he said, that sly little grin lifting the corners of his mouth.

“Why? Are we going somewhere?” I asked, almost hopeful I’d get a new change of scenery.

He nodded. “You have until tomorrow to pack whatever it is you want or need. We leave in the afternoon.”

“Where are we going?” I asked way too excitedly.

“And spoil the surprise? I don’t think so.”

“Obviously somewhere cold,” I said, giving him the slyness in my smile now.

“And that’s the only hint you’ll get. Now get upstairs and start packing. I have a lot of work to get done before we leave.”

Darren then stood up to leave, kissing me on the forehead before he left the room.

Looking down at the fleece leggings in my hands, I didn’t know what to think. Obviously, he’d decided to exploit my confession about the coming of Christmas and was likely taking me somewhere with snow. Maybe we were going somewhere with mountains? I felt my heart race with excitement and couldn’t help but smile at the idea of getting the fuck out of this house. I was getting tired of beaches surrounding me.

I quickly headed back to my room and looked in my closet, trying to figure out what the hell I should pack. I didn’t have any clothes fit for winter, except for the new leggings in my hand. I briefly wondered if Clive Owen might be able to assist, and then laughed at how funny it might be. I poked my head out of my bedroom door to find the two of them standing like statues as always.

“Hey, Team Rocket, you guys know what the hell I’m supposed to pack for this surprise little trip?”

“The necessities, Miss Jaden,” Clive answered without moving from his position.

“Yeah, but what are the necessities? I don’t have any winter clothes.”

“Your clothing will be provided for you. Just bring what you think you’ll need to keep up your appearance.”

“Like your hairspray,” Owen added with a smug smile.

I scoffed at him. “Hairspray can make an excellent flame thrower, Owen. Just remember that,” I snapped and shut the door on them.

Asses.

Trudging over to my closet, I grabbed a good-sized duffel bag and headed into my bathroom. I packed my flat iron, curling iron, *hairspray*, my face wash and moisturizers, toothbrush and hairbrush, some makeup, and hair ties. Thankfully, there was enough room for my tablet and iPod. The bag zipped closed easily and sat on my bed looking sad and lonely. It was weird not having a larger secondary bag containing my clothes. I didn’t care for any of the clothes in my closet currently, and I was curious about the change in my wardrobe when we got to wherever the hell it was that he was taking me.

I really shouldn’t let myself get excited. This trip was just another form of manipulation, Darren’s way of buying my affection, and I hated that I’d have to fucking reward him for it. I had to try to enjoy myself, give him the illusion that I was blissfully ignorant of his methods of “persuasion” when it came to winning me over. He’d lose, but I doubted he wouldn’t be able to surprise me nonetheless. I had no idea what to expect, but I had a feeling it was going to be nothing like what I was expecting.

I didn’t see Darren for the rest of the night or even the following morning for breakfast. I went through my normal routine for the day, working out for my singular solid hour, showering, lunchtime, and a stupid-ass painting session before I was finally called away to clean up and meet Darren downstairs in ten minutes.

After washing up in my bathroom, I came out to find Owen and Clive standing in my room.

“Ready?” Clive asked me.

“Yeah,” I replied, suddenly nervous.

Clive nodded then took my little travel bag from my dresser while Owen led me out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Darren was talking on the phone as he paced in the foyer, glancing at me only when I finally stood on the final step. I waited for him now while Clive and Owen went to load our luggage into the trunk of the car.

“Excellent. I’ll come by to pick it up in two days. Thanks,” Darren spoke into the phone and hung up.

So not only were we going somewhere unknown to me, Darren had business to attend to there. Great.

Pocketing his phone, he turned to me still standing on the last step, and I found myself suddenly irritated by the fact that even though I was a step higher, the motherfucker was still taller than I was. He smiled, knowing what I was thinking, and placed his hands on my hips, pulling me toward him.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I guess,” I said with a shrug. Not like I had a choice in where I was going anyway.

“You’re going to love it. I promise,” he gleamed.

“I’ll decide that,” I said with a smirk, but Darren just smiled in his usual “challenge accepted” sort of way.

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand and tugging me out the door and into the car, another sleek BMW. Clive and Owen stood off to the side, watching closely. Were they not going with us? I couldn’t help but notice the exact same car idled in front of ours and another was behind it. I didn’t know if I should feel better knowing we had backup in case of some kind of attack, or worse, that we needed it in the first place.

Scott was already behind the wheel while Darren ushered me into the backseat. Strapping myself in, I stared out the window. Waiting only a few seconds before the car took off, I watched as we left my shadows and pretty cage behind. I wondered what the newest temporary one would look like.

Darren was mostly silent as he studied his tablet, his eyes focused and determined as he read whatever he was reviewing. At one point, he even pulled out the stylus, made notes, and sent it off. I was such a snoop, but I couldn’t help it. I just hoped he didn’t catch me doing it.

The car was luxurious and comfortable with all its soft black leather and dark tinted windows. The glass windows seemed much thicker than usual, and my heart skipped a beat when I suddenly realized they were bulletproof. I sat back in my seat, suddenly feeling all the blood drain from my face, and I came to remember that being with Darren automatically put me danger. He wasn’t the only threat to my safety—his enemies were. And the moment I married him, the target on my back would suddenly triple in size. Fuck.

About thirty minutes later, we arrived at the tarmac where Darren’s private plane was waiting. I groaned aloud, remembering the last and first time I had ever been on a plane and the lack of joy I experienced during my travel.

“Everything will be fine, Jaden,” Darren said, his eyes still transfixed on his work as he typed away in an email.

“As long as you don’t have any ties to terrorist groups who could shoot us out of the sky,” I retorted.

Darren shrugged. “They’re not that stupid,” he said plainly.

I felt my jaw drop.

The car pulled over to stop, and Scott quickly exited to open my door, which was under child lock, of course. The men from the other cars loaded our baggage on the plane, the same plane I suddenly had no interest in boarding, no matter where it was going.

Darren walked up the steps to the plane first, Scott behind me as I stood at the bottom, suddenly frozen in place. Why was I so terrified of flying? I had a better chance of dying in a car accident... or did I? Now that I drove around in bulletproof vehicles.

“Jaden, let’s go,” Darren said, turning back to look at me, but I couldn’t ignore the slight tremor of the growl in his voice.

“Okay, okay,” I said, shaking my head and putting on my big bitch panties to walk up those goddamn steps.

I sucked in a breath as I sat down in my seat within the cabin across from Darren who now looked a little irritated. He patted the seat next to him by the window while giving me a no-nonsense glare. I quickly switched seats while Scott took my place and sat down, opening a laptop on his lap.

Within ten minutes, we were in the air, and my knuckles were ready to burst from my skin from clutching the seat.

“Do you want some water?” Darren asked me, concern in his voice.

“So you can drug me again? Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

When the plane leveled, Darren got up and pulled a bottle of water out of the mini fridge connected to the bar, handing it to me.

“It’s not drugged. I promise,” he assured me.

“Fine,” I said, taking the bottle and nearly downing it. I hated appearing this nervous, but I had no clue where we were going, what direction, and how long the flight was. Maybe I could get some hints. Darren was still typing on his tablet when I finally got the courage to ask him.

“Gonna tell me where we’re going yet?”

“Nope,” he replied casually, his eyes never leaving the screen in his hands.

I sighed. “Can you at least tell me how long the flight will be?”

“Seven hours,” he replied.

“Seven?!”

“Want the drugs now?” he asked with a smirk.

“No,” I snapped, turning away to pull out my iPod and listen to my music.

Two naps, dinner, and seven hours later, I felt myself being woken up.

“Jaden, wake up. We’re about to land,” came Darren’s voice.

I groaned in my sleep, slipping off the blanket that had magically appeared around me, and stretched like a cat. I moved to lift the window blind when Darren gripped my wrist.

“Leave those shut,” he ordered.

“Why?”

“Because I told you to, that’s why,” he said sternly.

“Fine,” I replied and lifted my hand away from the blind like it was a wild animal.

“Clothes have been laid out for you on the bed. I need you to quickly change into them. It’s very cold outside.”

“Cold, huh?”

“Extremely,” he confirmed.

That was when I noticed Darren had changed his clothes. He wore a black turtleneck that showed off every muscular inch of him, dark jeans, and black leather boots. Goddamn him. The man could probably look good in a fucking potato sack.

“Now, hurry up,” he said, pulling me from my seat and giving my ass a light swat.

Making my way into the bedroom, I found a long-sleeved gray sweater dress, thick black fleece-lined leggings, a pair of sleek looking black knee-high snow boots, and a long black wool pea coat, gray scarf, and gloves neatly laid out on the bed. Everything fit perfectly, the dress falling just above my knee, the leggings warm and soft, and the boots sturdy and comfortable. The coat was a little restricting, but most pea coats were. When I was dressed, I made my way back over to my seat, buckling myself in and waiting for the dreaded descent to begin.

When the plane finally landed, and we were cleared to exit, Darren pulled a large black blindfold from his pocket. I instantly groaned.

“Oh, come on. Really?”

“Turn around,” he ordered.

I released a minor huff and turned around so he could tie the blindfold around my eyes.

“I want to keep my surprise intact.”

I rolled my eyes behind the blindfold. “I think you’re taking this surprise business too seriously.”

Darren chuckled.

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30

A GIFT

As soon as the door to the plane opened, cold air instantly blasted my body and face. I immediately stepped back, shrinking away from the cold only to press myself into Darren. He helped me down the stairs and into the backseat of a warm car. I could hear more people around us, men shuffling around before car doors slammed shut, and we were on our way.

I could tell it was nighttime from the lack of light and warmth from the sun and I was busying myself in my mind with where the hell we could be that was seven hours away and cold as fuck. There were too many damn possibilities, but I had a lingering hope that it just might be exactly where I thought it was.

I knew Scott was in the driver's seat, and by the way the car rocked up and down, we were driving on a rough trail. It took us nearly an hour to get to wherever we were going, and as each minute went by, the incline steadily increased. I wondered if Darren would be really that mad if I sneaked a peek under the blindfold. I was beyond tempted.

Eventually, we finally pulled onto another road, and a few minutes later, we stopped. I could hear Scott roll down the window, eliciting the sound of buttons being pushed, followed by the squeaky creak of metal on metal. Gates opening?

We pulled forward, the car making a slow, wide turn before finally stopping, and doors suddenly opening.

"Stay here, Jaden," Darren said, so I sat back and waited, even more tempted to pull off my blindfold. Barely a minute later, I felt my door being opened and my hand gripped. "Come on," came Darren's voice.

I followed his guidance out of the car, allowing him to take both of my hands and lead me off. “Just follow my footsteps,” he said.

We walked for a few short minutes, my boots crunching into what was no doubt snow until it met pavement. Pavement turned into wood and wood turned into a metal railing where my hands were placed.

“Ready?” asked Darren, his voice slightly smug.

“Yes,” I nearly snapped.

And then he lifted the blindfold.

Eagerly blinking away the blurriness, my vision finally focused on the most amazing scene I had ever laid my eyes on. Mountains. Beautiful snow-covered gigantic mountains. It was as if we were in the heart of it all, surrounded by snow-covered pine trees, rocks, and hills. We were standing on a wooden deck leading out to something I thought I’d only ever see on the back of a postcard.

A small lake glistened in the background bordered by mountains upon mountains, the sky an array of stars, like someone had blown silver glitter into the night while a full moon shaded the snow in a blanket of white light, making it sparkle and glisten.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered. “Where are we?”

“Alaska,” Darren replied.

I turned around in shock. “Alaska?!”

“Anchorage, to be more specific.”

I turned back around to admire the view. “It’s beautiful.”

It was everything I’d ever wanted to see, and I suddenly remembered revealing to Darren long ago that if I had ever wanted to travel, I’d want to see mountains. And here I was, surrounded by a dream come true.

I released a long satisfied breath, unable to hide the small smile lingering in the corners of my mouth. Manipulation at its finest.

“You remembered,” I said blankly, staring off into the night. He remembered during our little game of pool that I’d always wanted to see mountains. And here I was.

“Of course, I did,” he said smoothly, almost triumphantly.

Bastard.

“I supposed you’ll want a medal.”

A light chuckle rolled up Darren’s throat, igniting my skin in goose bumps.

“Just a thank-you would be nice.”

I dug my heel into the floor of the deck. I didn't want to thank him, but it was just another bullet I needed to bite. My arms crossed over my chest, I turned around and looked him dead in the eyes, ignoring the smugness that lingered.

"Thank you," I said sincerely, and it left a sour aftertaste in my mouth.

"You're welcome," he replied with a smirk. "But this isn't the end of the surprise. There is still so much more to show you."

I lifted my brows. "There's more?"

"Much more"—he nodded—"come on."

Darren took my hand and led me back around to the front of the house, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the beauty around us, even if it was dark out. But when we did reach the front of the house, the trees around me were forgotten. The house before me was like nothing I had ever seen before, and I couldn't help but gasp at its architectural beauty. The house was a massive log cabin, with wide-open windows, cobblestone walls, and at least a foot of snow covering every inch of the roof.

"Like it?" Darren asked as he watched me, that smug smile returning.

"It's... gorgeous," I said. I couldn't lie. It was definitely a dream home.

Darren then put his leather gloved hands over my eyes and held me still. "Last time. Now, keep 'em shut."

"Okay." I groaned, my voice a little shaky. I didn't like the vulnerability he was creating, but I went with it.

"Follow my steps," he ordered.

Again, I followed every move he made, stepping where he told me, even up the steps to the door. I listened to it open, and a welcoming blast of warm air that smelled faintly of cinnamon immediately greeted me.

We walked further, my boots connecting with stone floor until it transitioned to wood. With each step, the sound of Christmas carols playing in the background grew louder and louder until the unmistakable "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" strung itself through my ears. Darren then finally stopped my advancement.

"This was all for you, Jaden. Merry Christmas," Darren said softly and pulled his hands from my eyes.

It took a few blinks for my eyes to focus, but when they did, it was like Christmas had vomited itself all over the house. A massive Christmas tree decked out in lights, beads, and ornaments stood tall in the center of the room, surrounded by more Christmas decorations covering nearly every

inch of the giant room I stood in. Christmas carols played over the speakers in the corners of the ceiling, and the bowl of Christmas potpourri companioned with red candles confirmed my suspicion of the scent of cinnamon.

The room we were standing in was a grand foyer with a gray slate stone tile floor, the walls stacked with large wooden logs, the furniture consisting of antique yet comfy looking burgundy red couches facing each other in front of the biggest stone fireplace I had ever seen. A fire had been lit, giving off a wave of soothingly warm air while a rustic chandelier glittered above me, together cascading the room in a soft, warm glow.

The scene was nothing short of breathtaking, and it made me forget that Darren was even standing in the room while the guards busied themselves behind us. It suddenly dawned on me that he had done all this for me, to make me happy. I knew it was another form of manipulation, but... goddamn was it working.

I turned around to find him standing a few feet behind me looking perfectly pleased with himself, his hands in the pockets of his black pea coat as his eyes devoured my reaction. I was smiling. I could feel the pull on my cheeks, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. Christmas was my favorite holiday, and Darren was going to exploit the shit out of that for his benefit. And I was totally content with letting him do it. I wouldn't fall for his tricks, but he was welcome to try, especially if they resulted in this kind of effort.

“You did all this for me?”

“I did,” he admitted with a short nod. “I know how much you like Christmas, and I thought you might like this.”

“It’s just...perfect,” I said, turning back around to admire it all. “How long are we staying?”

“Until New Year’s Day.”

That’s it?

I dreaded the idea of going back to the estate, the place where my life felt like it was at a standstill, never moving forward from a place I had once escaped from.

“Come on. I’ll show you to our room,” he said, reaching out for my hand.

“We’re sharing a room now?”

“You’ll always have your own space at the estate, but everywhere else will be conjoined.”

“Everywhere else?” I asked as he led me up the staircase to the first floor.

“Yes,” was all he said, and I took that as my hint that he wouldn’t be revealing any more information.

Leading me down the hallway, I couldn’t help but admire the continued Christmas decorations and trimmings all along the log cabin walls. The lighting throughout the house was soft and not bright, giving it a nice warm touch. Darren stopped us at a door at the very end of the hallway and pulled out a key to unlock it. Opening it slowly, he ushered me inside, and my jaw dropped for the third time that day.

The bedroom was gorgeous and even bigger than my own bedroom at the estate. Decked out in more decorations, the room held an endearing countryside wilderness theme to it. A large canopy bed rested at the back of the room, covered in burgundy red blankets and pillows, and I wondered how deep I’d fall into it if I jumped on it right now. It looked that comfortable. A set of comfy dark brown suede looking furniture sat in front of another massive stone fireplace with what looked like a bearskin rug laid out in front of it.

But what caught my eye was the very bland, very naked looking pine tree standing off by the heavily curtained windows. Next to the tree were a bunch of red bins stacked on top of each other.

Well, this was interesting...

I took a few steps into the room; my mind was swimming with so much stimuli, I wasn’t sure how to cope with the change in scenery. I could feel Darren’s eyes on me, watching me intently as I took everything in. It only took him a few seconds of deliberation before he took me by my shoulders and led me over to the windows. Standing behind me, he reached out for the curtains and pulled them aside to reveal the view outside.

I couldn’t help but gasp just a little at how unreal everything was. We seemed to be somehow in the heart of the mountain because that was all I could see out that window.

“God, this is amazing,” I said.

“I’m very glad to see that you’re happy.”

I bit down on my tongue. I hated that he thought he was winning something here. I couldn’t lie and say that I wasn’t happy with the change

of scenery and that he was making an effort to please me, but it made me sick to my stomach knowing I would have to reward him for his gift. If I didn't, he would see me as ungrateful and probably punish me somehow, and if I did reward him, he would think he was one step closer to winning me over, and that I would eventually forgive him for everything if he kept up this kind act. I sighed in frustration.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

"I have some work I need to take care of, so I've left a little task for you," he said as he moved me over to the naked tree. "I expect this thing to be covered from top to bottom in decorations by the time I get back."

I looked up and down the tree, my lips forming into a grimace. The tree was easily an eight-footer. It could take me hours.

"I'll need a ladder," I replied.

"I'll have someone bring one up," he said. "And you are not to leave this room until I return, understand? If you need anything, someone will be standing outside."

"Of course," I said with a nod.

Darren stepped toward me, wrapping his hand around the back of my neck and pulling me toward him. He dipped down and met my lips with his, kissing me with a gentle passion I found endearing—the kind that took my breath away.

"You should know... just because you escaped the perimeter once does not make it obsolete. It surrounds the entire property line, Jaden. Don't disappoint me."

Fuck, I'd forgotten all about that.

"I won't," I promised.

Darren nodded. "I'll be back soon," he said, breaking the kiss and gazing down at me.

And then he was gone.

I turned around to face my new task, noticing how big the damn tree was. It would take me a while to decorate it all by myself, but I was still thankful to have something to do while Darren was gone.

Unstacking the red bins, I rummaged through the contents. One bin contained all kinds of lights, one with beads and tinsel, and the other three with all kinds of ornaments and tree toppers. About five minutes later, the door opened, and a guard walked in with a large stepping stool.

"Thank you," I said as he placed it down near the tree.

He gave me a short nod and then exited the room without a single word. It was still weird that people were actually afraid to talk to me because of Darren or maybe because they knew I could potentially get them killed. Ignoring it, I turned up the radio that was playing the Christmas carols and got to work.

An hour later, I had successfully decorated the shit out of the tree. The warm glow of the white lights cascaded against the colorful glass bulbs that twinkled in the light. The silver tinsel was a nice complement to the silver accents on the red, gold, and silver tree skirt. The only thing that was missing was the damn tree topper. I couldn't decide which one I wanted. There was either a classic star that lit up or an angel, and for some reason, I didn't like either choice. I wanted something different, something fun.

I looked among the decorations to see if anything else could be used, rummaging through the bins again until I came across a red Santa hat. I laughed at the idea and immediately started to climb the ladder but slumped when I realized I still came up too short. I could barely reach the top of the tree. Standing on my tiptoes, I leaned forward, doing my best to watch my balance as my arm stretched as far as it could go to place the Santa hat on the top. And that was when I felt the ladder give out.

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31

PLANS



When I was finished making sure every security measure was in place, and every plan set for tomorrow, I headed back to the room to check on Jaden and her progress with the Christmas tree. I was impressed with the speediness of the staff, considering I'd only given them barely two days' notice to ready the house. I surprised myself with how much money I was willing to spend on Jaden without even blinking an eye, but then again, the smile on her face when she first laid eyes on everything was fucking priceless. I'd give just about anything to see her smile like that again.

I nodded at the guard who was standing watch by the room and opened the door to find Jaden standing at the top of the short stepladder, leaning over far too much to place whatever the fuck was in her hand on the top of the tree. Only slightly panicking, I quickly made my way over to her just in time to catch her when the ladder gave out and her body fell forward. My arms instantly shot out, catching her before she fell face first into the nicely decorated tree she'd just finished.

Jaden gasped in surprise in my arms as I pulled her securely to my chest. She turned her cheek around to look at me just in time to notice the glare I was sure I had plastered all over my face. I hated when she put herself in positions like this.

“Nice catch,” she said. It was the closest I was going to get to a thank you.

“What the hell were you trying to do?”

She huffed, and I found it oddly cute. “I was trying to top the tree, but I can’t really reach it with just the ladder.”

I looked at the top of the tree, realizing it was, in fact, too tall for her to reach, and laughed. She could kick most men in the head with her adorable little feet, but she couldn’t successfully top a tree without knocking over her stepladder.

My throat still filled with laughter, I righted her in my arms before lifting her onto my shoulders, giving her the height she needed to reach the top of the tree. She positioned herself the way she needed to without protest and placed her topper on the tree, adjusting it the way she wanted it.

“Done,” she said, and I lowered myself to let her down. She then immediately stood tall and looked back to admire her work. “What do you think?” she asked me.

I took a good look at her work and found myself admiring her design. Her strategic placement of the bulbs and lights ensured that everything obtained its fair share of attention as the lights glowed and the ornaments glittered in contrast. I even admired the funny Santa hat that she had placed at the top.

“It looks great,” I praised her. “But I think next time you should wait for me to top the tree.”

“I would have been fine,” she retorted with another huff.

“It’s not you I’m worried about. Those are hand-painted bulbs. The crafters would kill me if I let anything happen to them,” I said with a smirk.

She looked over at me with that adorable no-nonsense glare of hers. “Ha-ha,” she said and went back to admiring her tree.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“Not really,” she said, a yawn now escaping her lips. “Just tired, I think.”

“Bedtime it is then.”

“But I wanted to explore the house,” she pleaded.

I shook my head. “It’s late. You can explore tomorrow while I’m working.”

“You’re still going to be working, huh?”

I nodded. “No rest for the wicked.”

“Ha,” she snickered, another yawn not far behind.

Jaden then went into the bathroom presumably to wash up for bed. I took another good look and admired her decorating skills, actually

appreciating the warm colored lights that complemented the room. Removing my clothes, I pulled back the heavy covers of the bed and slid in, checking a few emails on my phone while I waited for Jaden.

When she finally emerged, her hair was brushed and soft, her subtle makeup gone, and she seemed relaxed. She even voluntarily stripped her clothing before sliding under the covers without me having to remind her. After turning off the lights, I reached over and pulled Jaden to my bare chest. Just feeling her against me was enough to relax me completely, and I couldn't help but let the pent-up exhaustion finally sink in. I hadn't slept much in the last few days, trying to get as much of my work done before I brought her out here so I could actually spend some time with her. And now that we were here, all I wanted to do was fucking sleep with her wrapped in my arms. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and I wanted to make this trip as memorable for Jaden as I possibly could, but I still had so much shit to do. It was never ending.

When Jaden's body finally relaxed and slumped against me, I knew she'd fallen asleep. I always waited for her to fall asleep first. It gave me a proper sense of security. Knowing she was asleep and safe beside me gave me the assurance I needed to relax and follow suit. Tightening my grip around Jaden's small frame, I closed my eyes and let the sounds of her soft breathing lull me to sleep.

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32

CHRISTMAS EVE



When I woke up the next morning, Darren was gone. And thank fuck for that. Rolling over onto my back, I stretched out like a damn cat before pulling myself out of bed. Noticing that the curtains had been drawn, I couldn't help but rush over and yank them open.

For the first time, I felt mesmerized by the sheer beauty of nature. Last night, I had only seen the mountains in the dark, the only light gifted by the moon, but now, now, they were in the spotlight of the morning sun. Pine trees surrounded us, but they did nothing to hide the unbelievable scene in front of me. The mountains of Alaska were everything I thought they would be and more. White powdery snow continued to cover everything like a thick blanket of icy cotton. I found myself wanting to go outside, to go out and play in the snow like I was a ten-year-old girl again. Hopefully, Darren would let me.

I didn't know if any of the rules had changed or what considering my damn electroshock perimeter was still up, but it was best to assume they were rather than break them and risk pissing him off after he'd done all this for me. I wanted to tell him that the capabilities of his money wouldn't seduce me, but I didn't want to start a fight either. He'd likely try to fuck the ungratefulness out of me after bruising my ass for the rest of the week. I didn't need that shit. Best to just go with the flow and enjoy the change of scenery.

Turning back around to admire the room once again, I looked over to find a note on the nightstand. I sighed and headed over to the little table, knowing I probably wasn't going to like what it said.

Jaden,

Get dressed and go downstairs to the dining room. The staff will ask you what you want for breakfast. You may order whatever you'd like. After that, Romero and Alex will escort you through the house so you can explore. They are waiting outside: I will see you later.

- Darren

So it looked like Darren had my day already planned for me, yet again. Yawning, I put the note back and looked over at the clock to see it was 9:36 a.m. My stomach immediately dropped. I felt my body shudder as I realized I was late for breakfast, but if that were true, why wasn't I bent over Darren's lap at the moment? He must be letting me sleep in for once; at least, I hoped.

Trying to calm my racing heartbeat, I headed into the bathroom for a quick shower. Wrapping the towel around my still dripping body, I went into the closet to see if my wardrobe had changed to more favorable outfits. They somewhat had. I found a shit ton of fleece-lined leggings, some black, gray, dark purple, and burgundy, along with a bunch of sweater dresses, some shorter than others, some that hung off the shoulders, and some thicker and heavier than others were. To my surprise, I saw mostly black, gray, forest green, dark red, purple, and blue—not much pink at all. I even found workout clothing for me without a single skort in sight. Now, this was more like it.

I also found thick thigh-high wool-lined socks, along with hats, gloves, coats, and scarfs of all colors and designs. Most of the shoes at my disposal were knee-high boots, either riding style or snow boots, but some were high heeled, and some were actual slippers. The only thing I didn't find in that

closet were panties. No thongs, no nothing. Just bras. Maybe it was his compromise for the leggings.

Selecting a black pair of leggings, a long gray sweater, and black riding boots, I got dressed quickly, dried and flat ironed my hair, and headed out, but as I opened the door, a wall of a human stood in my way. Upon hearing the door open, the wall turned around to reveal two men; one with short dark hair, a clean-shaven face, and the same type of sunglasses Clive and Owen usually wore, only these were much dimmer. The other had shaggy blond hair with a little bit of fuzz on his face. They both wore heavy black turtlenecks and black pants, and they were both so muscled, I thought their sweaters were going to pop open. The dark-haired guy actually kind of looked a little like John Cena with all that bulk.

“Romero and Alex, I presume?” I asked politely. “Or should I just refer to you guys as ‘Thing 1 and Thing 2’?”

They both turned around like swinging doors from the Wild, Wild West, fresh smirks on their faces.

“Who’s who?” I asked.

“Romero,” the dark-haired one said and pointed at the other. “Alex.”

Alex nodded in acknowledgment.

I crossed my arms. “So you guys are the new temporary babysitters?”

Romero smirked. “Looks like it, pipsqueak.”

I tilted my head in shock before responding. “Best of luck, then.”

Both of their smiles practically stretched all the way to their eyes.

“I’m supposed to go to the dining room for breakfast, but I don’t know where that is,” I said.

“This way,” Romero replied with a nod, and I proceeded to follow him down the hall while Alex walked behind me. I tried to look and walk as cooperative as possible so they wouldn’t be suspicious of anything. I was sure Darren warned them of my so-called “tricks,” but hey, I was just keeping them on their toes. Someone had to entertain me around here, and it certainly wasn’t going to be Darren.

Romero was tall, but not as tall as Darren was. Though his stride was just as fast, it still allowed for me to keep up with him easily. Alex lacked only a few inches, but he was still a big motherfucker.

Romero led me through the house, which contained several windows at every turn, giving the house access to as much natural light as the space would allow. It was definitely the most luxurious cabin I’d ever seen. The

dining room was toward the back of the house, surrounded by walls of windows and showing off the most beautiful view of the winter wonderland outside.

“Take a seat. I’ll alert the staff,” Romero said and walked through the swinging door to the kitchen. Alex stood off to the side quietly watching me. I sat down at the table that allowed me the best view of the outdoors and waited only a few moments before Romero returned with a young woman at his side.

“Good morning, miss. What would you like for breakfast?” she asked me politely. She had dark brown hair twisted into a tight bun behind her head just above her neck and wore a simple black dress with black flats. She was pretty and had a nice smile. I hated that I found myself instantly liking her.

I thought for a moment about what I wanted, but there was only one true answer to give.

“Strawberry crepes?” I asked, hoping that was an available option. Darren said I could order whatever I wanted, which was a first, so I’d be taking advantage.

She nodded. “Of course. Anything else?”

“And a bowl of raspberries, please.”

She nodded again. “I will inform the chef. Would you prefer coffee or tea?”

“Tea, please. Green, if you have it.”

“I will be right back,” she said with another nod and turned away to the kitchen.

I returned my gaze back out the window, aware that Romero had joined Alex at his side, his hands folded in front of him as he watched me. A few short minutes later, the same woman from before brought out a silver tray containing my tea and placed it on the table in front of me.

“Your breakfast will be out shortly. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you,” I said nicely.

See? I can be nice sometimes... when the occasion called for it.

Pouring my tea, I stirred a few scoops of sugar in it and took a sip. It was perfect.

Not long after that, my breakfast was brought out and placed in front of me, and my stupid, deprived mouth couldn’t help but drool. I had loved crepes ever since my high school days in French class when we got to

experience French cuisine. I hadn't had crepes since coming to Darren's captivity. In fact, I never really got to experience anything that wasn't healthy for me except for the occasional glass of wine. I'd hoped that maybe the holidays would give me a bit of a reprieve.

Cutting into my breakfast and taking my first bite, I couldn't help but moan in total satisfaction. These were fantastic. I ate my breakfast in earnest, finishing my entire plate as well as the bowl of raspberries. I felt like I was going to burst from it all, but it was worth it. When I was done, I piled the plates up on the tray and stood from the table to stretch before turning to my guards.

"I'm going to explore the house. A polite distance would be appreciated," I said as nicely as I could. I didn't want the giant on my heels everywhere I stepped.

"I'm sure it would," Romero replied, "but it's not guaranteed."

Yeah, yeah.

I grimaced at him before turning on my heels to begin my expedition. The cabin was a lot bigger than I thought it was. There were five bedrooms, six bathrooms, and a finished basement, complete with a gym, sauna, and showers. There was an entertainment room, a study, a sunroom of nothing but windows looking out over the lake, a gigantic five-car garage, and of course, Darren's office. The rooms were all lavish with a woodland décor and rustic interior.

Even though the cabin wasn't as big as Darren's estate, there were still plenty of guards posted throughout and staff busying themselves. No one looked at me. No one said a word. Even here, I was invisible. Some faces I recognized; others I didn't.

But the one face I recognized the most was the guard who dragged me out of the house to meet Darren and that poor gardener, the same one who assisted in his torture. But something was different about him as he walked past me, his eyes deliberately avoiding me, just like mine were supposed to be avoiding him. With a bald head and the only hair covering him being the dark patch on his chin, I quickly figured it out. His fucking ears were missing.

I couldn't help but commit a double take as my eyes locked onto the shredded and scarred remains of his ears. What the fuck happened to them?

"Eyes elsewhere, Miss Jaden," Romero ordered. I turned back around to face them as we kept walking.

“What happened to his ears?” I asked quietly.

Romero and Alex gave me strange smiles, like it was funny but they weren’t sure if they should tell me.

“Come on,” I pleaded. “It’ll be our little secret.”

Romero nodded for me to move forward. “Mr. Davis cut them off. Since Eric can’t listen to directions, Mr. Davis felt like he didn’t need them.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, and the two of them almost ran into me.

“Fucking hell,” I whispered under my breath. Had I caused that, too?

“Mouth, Miss Jaden,” Romero reminded me sternly.

“Yeah,” I said, biting my lip in thought before turning back around to continue my expedition.

Forcing Eric and his lack of ears from my mind, it took me a little less than an hour to explore the entire cabin and learn the layout of each floor, all the while with my guards no more than ten feet away from me. You’d think I’d be used to constant shadows by now, but I still hated how limited my privacy was.

Looking out the wide window of the sunroom, I loomed over the grounds and found myself wanting to explore the outside now. I probably needed special permission before I could do that, though. So I turned to Romero and Alex.

“I’d like to explore the grounds outside if you don’t mind,” I said carefully.

Romero shook his head. “You’ll have to get permission from Mr. Davis first.”

I figured as much. “All right. Where is he?”

“In the gym.”

“To the gym then,” I said and immediately headed that way while Romero and Alex exchanged looks of nervousness.

Bitches.

33

ADMISSION

When I opened the door to the gym, I found Darren standing in the middle of an octagon cage, his hands covered in black wraps, and his bare upper body and hair glistening with sweat. Scott was opposite him; the exact same appearance only he wore a tight black muscle shirt. The two were breathing heavy, and their skin was flush from rushing blood. They circled each other only for a moment before Scott finally advanced, throwing a fast jab toward Darren's face, which Darren easily dodged. Kicks were exchanged, a few more strikes, but I could see Darren was on defense, almost like he was trying to tire Scott out. Scott was good, and I mean really good, but Darren was just a tad bit better. Scott seemed to stiffen up after a while, but Darren's remained loose and relax, well-conditioned, sharp and agile.

A few more missed strikes later, Darren caught Scott's arm, shifted his hips to sharply pivot his body into Scott's, and flipped him right over his side, taking Scott to the ground. Shit, he was fast. Scott was easily two hundred and thirty pounds, so the loud bang he made when he hit the floor almost jolted me. The impact looked like it knocked the wind out of Scott, giving Darren the advantage to drag Scott's body up and pull him into a rear naked choke. It only took ten seconds before Scott finally tapped out.

Goddammit. I hated how impressive Darren was.

Darren released him, and the two slowly staggered back to stand where they shared a quick handshake and exited the cage. Darren suddenly locked his focus on me as he made his way over to a weight bench and laid down.

"What do you want, Jaden?" he asked, grabbing the bar and lifting it up while Scott stood behind his head to spot. The fucking thing had three one

hundred pounds of weight on each side. His muscles rippled and tensed under the pressure, and I found myself having a hard time concentrating on why I was here in the first place. I just watched Darren put Scott into a submission, and now, he was bench-pressing six hundred pounds like it was whatever. Fuck.

“Jaden,” he said, grunting after the tenth rep, and I realized I’d been staring for far too long. Trying to focus on what I came here for, I folded my arms and licked my suddenly dry lips.

“I just wanted to see if you would mind if I went outside for a while.”

Darren finished his set before returning the bar to the stand and sat up, regarding me closely. His breathing was a little heavy, but it was even, and the sweat dripping down his lightly tanned skin was nothing short of a distraction.

“Have you been a good girl today?” he asked, his brow slightly raising as a smirk formed across his lips. I narrowed my eyes at him before I made light of his asinine question.

I looked up toward my right in thought and placed my chin in my hand. “Hmm... I don’t think I’ve threatened anyone today. Does that count?”

Darren chuckled, giving me that shark-like grin of his, the one that warmed my stomach. “Give me fifteen minutes and then I’ll be up to go with you,” he said, laying back down to bench another set.

I watched him push the weight up and down a few more times before I shook my head of the sight. “Mutant,” I mumbled and then walked out the door.

“Lightweight!” he yelled back, but I just shook my head and kept walking. At least, he was in an agreeable mood.

I headed back into our bedroom, intent on listening to some music and watching out the window while I waited for Darren. True to his word, fifteen minutes later, he appeared in the bedroom and headed straight for the bathroom for a quick shower. He was out in less than five minutes. I kept my eyes on the window knowing he’d emerged from the bathroom with nothing but a towel around his waist. I didn’t want him catching me checking out every stupid chiseled inch of him. Another three minutes and he was dressed in a light gray pullover sweater that hugged him like a second skin, dark jeans, and black leather boots. He laid his heavy black jacket on the bed, along with mine, gloves, and a hat.

“Put your coat on, please,” he ordered, now draping his over his shoulders.

Holy shit, did he just say please?

Happy that he’d actually asked nicely, I got up and did as he said and zipped up the parka, put on my gloves, but grimaced at his selection of hats. It was light purple with the little fuzzy pom-pom on top. The fuck...

Taking the hat, I rounded the bed, intent on choosing a different hat, but Darren grabbed my arm and stopped me.

“Uh, uh,” he said shaking his head.

“Oh, come on, Darren! I’m not twelve!”

He positively glared me. “Are you accusing me of being a pedophile?”

I felt my gut take a backflip. “No, I just—”

“Then stop arguing and put the damn hat on,” he said darkly and began to lead me away from the closet and out into the hallway.

“But why does it have to be this one?”

“So I can easily spot you, that’s why; now, let’s go before I change my mind.”

I huffed and begrudgingly slid the hat on over my head, trying to ignore the heat in my cheeks from irritation. Why couldn’t I just have a plain black hat like his? Why did everything I wear have to stick out with color and impractical designs? He could easily spot me wearing a bright red hat just as well.

Ignoring my evident resistance, Darren escorted me downstairs to the sliding door that led out to a stone patio. It looked like someone had shoveled a path outside, revealing a slated pathway for us to follow. But I wasn’t interested in following someone else’s path. Naturally, I wanted to lay out my own, and naturally, that wasn’t allowed.

Darren slid the door aside and allowed me to walk out first. The chill of the air kissed my face, and I watched enthralled as my breath left behind a misty trail from my mouth. God, I missed the snow. Fall was my favorite season, but winter always seemed to bring a little bit of magic with it—magic that reminded me of home.

Not bothering to wait for Darren, I walked off on my own, observing everything and taking in every square inch of the land around me. The grounds weren’t as big as the estate in California, but everything was still gorgeous nonetheless. An area had a tall stone fireplace with benches and chairs all around, while snow-covered pine trees bordered along the

property. A covered hot tub near the house settled into the wood patio while a few stone benches were scattered across the property here and there. But the best of all was the array of mountains that surrounded the grounds. I couldn't stop looking up every few seconds to admire them all over again. Even the exterior of the cabin itself was something to praise.

Turning back around, I suddenly caught sight of myself in the window with the stupid frou-frou purple hat. I immediately scoffed and snatched the damn thing off my head, pulling the hood of my coat up over my head instead.

"Hey, put that back on," Darren said as he came toward me.

"No way. It looks ridiculous," I replied as I tried to stuff the thing in my coat pocket. "Hey!"

Darren's hands seized the hat halfway into my pocket, pulled my hood back, and roughly slid the hat back over my head.

"Keep it on. I don't need you getting sick out here," he admonished.
"Now, let's go."

Darren continued our walk, expecting me to follow him, but I had different plans now. Bending down, I grabbed a handful of perfectly packable snow and quickly formed a good-sized ball in my hand.

"You're such a bully!" I yelled and threw the snowball right square into Darren's back. The snowball exploded all over his jacket, causing him to immediately halt in his tracks. Slowly turning on his heels, Darren's expression was that of confusion and amusement.

"Did you just throw a snowball at me?"

"Yes," I admitted standing tall and firm.

"Big mistake," he replied, a playful glare on his face. He then bent down, grabbed a heap of snow in his giant hands and hurled his own snowball at me. It came so fast, I'd barely been able to dodge it, hunching my shoulders and taking the light impact to my upper arm and shoulder. Shaking the snow from my arm, I squared my shoulders and scowled at him.

"Okay. Now, it's on!" I shouted, and soon, a full-out war ensued.

For a good twenty minutes, Darren and I hauled snowballs at each other like we were both seventeen again. We ducked and dodged each other, hiding behind trees and parts of the cabin, and though he was able to hit me several times, I think the only time I actually hit him was the first shot fired. He was such a big target; I didn't understand how I could miss him. His

snowballs overshadowed mine by twice the amount of snow and flew far faster than mine did. He really was a mutant.

Throughout the entire snowball fight, I couldn't help but find myself actually enjoying it, even though I was sharing the experience with Darren. I knew I wasn't the only one sharing the same feeling. I swore I could hear Darren laughing. Whether it was at me and my shitty aim or the fact that he was actually having fun, I didn't know, but either way, it had to count for something.

I'd been crouched behind the fireplace packing several snowballs when I suddenly noticed the rain of fire had stopped... how long ago had it stopped? Panic took over as I grabbed two snowballs, one in each hand, and peeked my head around the fireplace. No Darren in sight. Oh, fuck, where did he go? He couldn't hide very well behind anything. Nothing was big enough to conceal him. I kept my body crouched low, my eyes scanning in every direction, searching everywhere for him, but he was nowhere to be found. I felt myself straighten. Maybe he went inside to take a call?

And that was when I felt myself get tackled to the snow-covered ground. I groaned aloud and quickly fought to regain my composure, but with the winter jacket and snow, there wasn't much room to give. I still somehow managed to wrap my arm around the back of his neck. He lifted his hips just enough for me to squeeze my legs through and wrap them around his waist to keep myself stationary and as close to his body as possible. I wasn't about to let myself get slammed to the ground as Scott had. But Darren was a cheater and eventually dug his big gloved fingers into my side, essentially tickling me.

I gasped and squirmed, gripping him tighter. "You cheating bastard!" I shrieked. I moved my leg from around his waist and planted my foot at his hip and pushed myself up to get away from his digging fingers. He was laughing, of course, because no matter where I went, he continued to fucking tickle me until my grip around his neck loosened enough for him to flip me around so I was trapped under him with absolutely nowhere to go.

"You've been breached, little girl." He chuckled above me, the smile on his face so evident in his accomplishment.

"Never say die," I replied with a smirk.

Darren sighed in satisfaction of his conquest and practically beamed down at me for what felt like the longest time. It made my breath hitch in my throat.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he suddenly said out of nowhere.

I looked up at him, trying to think of something better to say than the obvious thank you. He was watching at me with such an expression on his face, one I had no idea where to place.

“I’m more than just a pretty face, you know,” I teased.

“And isn’t that just my luck,” he replied. The heat of his gaze penetrated me deep in the pits of my stomach. It was the look of a man on the prowl, the hunter sweeping in for the kill and me, the ever-challenging prey he’d just caught.

In one fluid motion, Darren stood, pulling me up with him, and held me close. Those eyes, dark and menacing, swallowed me up in a whirlpool of desire and obsession, and I felt my breaths suddenly becoming heavier. Looking up into those dark, brooding eyes, I felt sickened when I realized I wanted him to kiss me. It made my heart pound in my chest. I hated how the only thing Darren had to do to make my heart race was to give me a certain look, one that petrified and enthralled me simultaneously.

“At least, you can admit it,” I whispered, but the lust in my own voice threw me off.

Without warning, Darren’s hand curled around the back of my neck and pulled me to him. I couldn’t help but gasp as his lips met mine, making me melt into him and giving him exactly what he wanted—what I wanted. Forcing my mouth open wider, his tongue delved into mine, seeking and destroying any chance of denying how much I loved it.

“Yes, at least I can voluntarily admit to something,” Darren murmured, breaking the kiss. “Unlike you... who can’t even admit to how much you love the way I touch you.” His chin rested against my forehead while the butterflies in my stomach swarmed like locusts. A fight was brewing again. I could feel it.

“Which part?” I asked bravely, my eyes down low as I fought to catch my breath. “The tender way you break my bones or the way you lovingly force orgasms from my body?”

Darren instantly gripped me tighter and jerked me toward him. “Which do you prefer, Jaden? Pleasure or pain? Because I’m beginning to think you’re a glutton for punishment.”

“Maybe I am,” I replied defiantly. “Maybe I like the pain because it reminds me of why I still hate you so much. Why I *should* still hate you.”

“You didn’t hate me five minutes ago,” he countered confidently.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter what mask I wear, Darren. I might let myself go for a moment, but eventually, the truth always finds its way back. I’m grateful that you’ve done all this for me,” I said, eying the scene around us, “but if you think this changes anything between us, you’re wrong. Because all of this is *your* mask, and I’m smart enough to know when I’m being played.”

Darren sighed, releasing a heavy breath through his nose. The weight of his eyes on me was enough to make me look away, regretting my bravery. This man had chained me, beaten me, raped me, killed my uncle, and then killed me. And he wanted me to admit I wanted his touch? I should torch myself for admitting such a stupid and reckless idea even in my head. What the fuck was wrong with me?

... survival...

No... fuck no...

“Boss!” I heard someone call from the sliding door of the house. Darren reluctantly released me from his gaze and turned to look over his shoulder. “There’s an important call for you,” said a guard holding the door open. Darren nodded and turned back to me, disappointment filling his eyes. He leaned in to kiss me on the side of my temple.

“Pain it is, then,” he whispered coldly and stepped away from me without another glance.

I felt my body shiver, and I didn’t know if it was from his absence or the promise in his words. When he’d fully disappeared from my sight, Romero and Alex appeared from the sliding door. They came over to me, shoulders hunched from the cold as they did not wear jackets. Great.

“Mr. Davis would like for you to come inside now,” he said. I nodded and followed him in without argument. “You’re to remain in your room for the rest of the day.”

Shocker.

I went back to our room, changing out of my winter clothes and grabbing my iPod and a deck of cards from my bag. Sitting on the floor in front of the fire, I plugged in my headphones and turned up my music—Evanescence to soothe the dark shadow consuming me.

One by one, I stacked the cards on top of each other, carefully balancing each one as I stumbled from one thought to the next. It was odd how calming it was just building a house of cards, how distracting it could be, yet it gave me the focus I needed to collect my thoughts.

God, I was stupid. I wanted to battle so badly, to remain defiant and stubborn and for what? So I could convince Darren to hurt me more so I could continue to drown in my own hatred for him? What kind of self-destructive shit was that? Maybe I really did need therapy.

How could I allow myself to get past all the torment he'd put me through? I'd been able to block it out before, too afraid of upsetting him and igniting his wrath. But now that he was trying to treat me with more luxury, the guilt of enjoying it settled in because I knew why I shouldn't accept it, enjoy it. It would cost me way too much.

I just didn't want to like Darren, even if it was only for a second. I didn't want to appreciate a single ounce of his lavish hospitality or the gifts he granted me... or even the pleasure he could give me. I didn't even want his mercy. If I accepted anything he gave me with genuine happiness, then it felt like I was somehow forgiving him for everything he'd ever done to me. Like an abusive husband buying his wife a diamond necklace for giving her a black eye the night before. Gifts were not Band-Aids, and they certainly weren't apologies. They were sparkly pieces of manipulation, and I would not take the bait. They didn't make anything better and neither would this goddamn trip.

But still, I lived in a world that required more compromising on my part than ever. Darren rarely compromised. It was his way, and it was the only way, yet here I was, sitting in front of a fire in Anchorage, Alaska, surrounded by mountains and snow on Christmas Eve. Darren didn't have to bring me here; he didn't have to have the house decorated for me. For all fucks given, he could have left me in that fucking cage in the basement until I forgot my own name. But again, here I was.

Some time later, I heard the door open and saw Romero from the corner of my eye bring in my dinner. He set it on the table in the middle of the room and then walked out. I never even touched it. I had no appetite, and I didn't want to leave the warmth of my spot.

My card house grew and grew in size and length. Occasionally a stack would fall, but I'd fix it quickly, making it bigger and better each time. It was difficult when I fought with myself, wrestling over how mentally strong I was. I worried about long-term trauma, and that if I gave into Darren's lavish lifestyle, if I accepted the gifts and privileges with an open heart, I'd stop seeing the mask he wore; I'd just believe it was real. I'd learn to ignore it to the point where I wouldn't even see the lie anymore. I didn't

want to come to accept him, but I didn't want to feel so angry all the time either, so fucking hopeless. I wanted to feel whole, not hollow, but the only thing Darren would fill me with was fear. If I allowed him to fill it with something else, what would that make me? A traitor? Or a survivor?

I would never love him, but I needed to supplement my hatred with something else. Something I could live with. I just didn't know what; it would require one hell of an admission. And an admission was exactly what Darren wanted.

I thought about what he'd said after we battled in the snow, about how I couldn't verbally admit to him that I craved his touch. It felt like every word was a descent into Hell, and once they were spoken, I could never take them back. Darren would make certain they'd haunt me forever. But though it might cost me whatever was left of my pride, what would it buy me? Would it bring me progress or would it only be used against me?

Just thinking about his hands on my body and what he could do, what he could make me feel, had me already heating up inside. I knew it was obvious that when I gave myself over and submitted to him, my body language couldn't speak the truth any louder than if I had actually spoken it. I wanted the pain and the pleasure, but not one without the other. The pain reminded me that Darren was a monster, and the pleasure reminded me I could handle it.

Yes, I could admit that I wanted Darren for the good things he could make me feel, for the way my blood rushed when he looked at me, the way my heart skipped when he spoke, and the way my core clenched with need every time he touched me. My hatred for Darren easily matched my attraction to him, and when I found those moments when I could let go of my hatred and focus on what he was doing to me, I could forget. And ignorance was fucking bliss.

So, yes, I wanted him, but I wanted my fucking freedom more.

Suddenly, a thick arm slid over my middle and yanked me up from the floor, causing my earbuds to rip from my ears and my card house to crumble. I pulled my legs in and clung to Darren's arm and shoulder, gasping in shock as he hauled me over to the bed and slammed me down on top of it. I managed to swing my legs around his hips and clasped my feet together to prevent him from getting much closer. I could already feel the anger rushing from him in waves, and I wasn't ready for that tsunami just yet.

“Darren, wait!” I screeched as I tried to push against his chest to gain space. He quickly grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my sides. I felt the heat blooming inside me already, my body preparing for what was to come. Literally.

“You wanted pain, remember?” he hissed, the lust in his voice unmistakable.

“I changed my mind,” I said quickly.

A low deep chuckle vibrated up Darren’s throat and caused the hair on my skin to stand.

“You made your bed, princess. It’s time to sleep in it,” he finalized.

“But that’s not what you want,” I countered, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

His eyes found mine and penetrated everything I was about to reveal... and it was going to kill me inside.

“You want me to admit that I want you,” I continued carefully. His chin tilted up an inch as he regarded me, an eyebrow lifting and waiting for me to continue. I swallowed back the desert that had claimed my mouth, trying to find the strength to say the words that might ruin me completely. “And I do.”

Darren’s eyes darkened, the shadows of his brow intensifying his gaze on me to the point that I thought I was going to suffocate, but I couldn’t look away. I had to meet him head-on. I had to prove my admission even if it destroyed me.

Darren’s grip on my wrists tightened until I could no longer feel them, and I couldn’t help but release a small gasp of pain. He then lowered his face to mine. “And what brought on this little conclusion?” he asked, his voice low and deep.

“I know it’s what you want.”

His grip loosened, his hands cascading up my arms until they cupped my face, lighting my skin on fire, inside and out. Darren’s forehead touched mine, his nose grazing along the bridge of my own before he spoke again.

“So you’re finally admitting what I already know?” he asked me. God, he was barely containing himself; I could feel it.

I felt my breath catch as he pressed his pelvis between my legs, the pressure increasing just enough to make me want more. That was what I wanted. I wanted a free pass to the train leaving denial land straight into the guilt-free zone. I wanted him for one purpose and one purpose only—to

pleasure me in his world of pain and anguish so I could forget the reason I was there.

“Yes,” I murmured, pushing myself into him. I wanted so much fucking more. “I want more. I want you to make me feel so good, I can’t even stand it.” My voice was hurried and lustful, and I didn’t wait another second before launching from the bed and claiming Darren’s lips for my own.

I kissed him with more passion than I thought I had in me. I locked my arms around his neck, pulling him to me, but it was more me pulling myself to him. Darren’s mouth met mine with just as much ferocity, and the moment he parted his lips, my tongue dove in, being the first to conquer and claim all it could touch. Darren moaned into my mouth, pressing himself harder into me before he finally lifted us up, turned and laid himself face up on the bed.

My legs straddled either side of his thickly muscled torso, my hands gripping his shirt while Darren’s gripped my hips, keeping me in place. When I got the message, Darren’s hands traveled higher, clutching the hem of my sweater and yanking it up over my head where it was tossed unceremoniously to the floor. When it was gone, I dipped back down to continue kissing him like I suddenly couldn’t get enough of his lips on mine. Never breaking our kiss, his hands inched around my back, unclasping my bra with a small pinch of his fingers where it followed the same fate of my sweater.

The moment my breasts were bare, Darren gripped my sides and lifted my chest toward his face, giving him all the access he needed to take my aching nipples into his hot, wet mouth. I gasped aloud, a moan not far behind as Darren’s mouth sucked and tongued at my pebbled flesh, making the pressure in my clit pulse with more need than ever before. His free hand palmed my other neglected breast, squeezing and kneading, eliciting more moans from my mouth.

My nails dug into his shoulders, and I suddenly realized he was still clothed. That wouldn’t do. Not after what I had just admitted. My hands snaked over his wide chest to begin pulling at his sweater, inching it up from under me until he got tired of my struggles. Launching his upper body off the bed at me, his kept an arm around my waist to keep me from falling off before reaching back and pulling his sweater and attached t-shirt up over his head, revealing all that hard muscle underneath.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asked huskily as the sweater and t-shirt joined my own clothes.

“Yes, thank you,” I breathed and went back to kissing him.

He kissed me back, groaning as my hands traveled up and down his torso, my fingers running over each hard line of his abdomen before sliding back up to his deliciously smooth chest. Laying himself back down, Darren gripped my hips and pulled them closer to his chest, his strong fingers digging into the stretchy material of my leggings. It only took him a second to rip the stitching apart to reveal the bare and swollen flesh between my legs.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Darren groaned and then lifted my hips to place my aching slit right over his waiting mouth.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried out as his tongue began assaulting my clit.

A swift smack on my ass followed, jerking me from my moment of transgression. Darren swallowed my clit whole, and the small flame now burning in the cheek of my ass only further enticed me, making me burn all over. I gripped the top of the wooden headboard, my Christmas clad nails ready to pop off at any moment if I dug any harder, but I desperately needed something to hold. Darren’s tongue continued to lap at my entire slit, flicking it in all the right places until I thought I was going melt into his mouth and drown him.

My breathing increased, my blood rushed, and if I didn’t calm myself down, I’d be dizzy with pleasure. But that was technically what I asked for, wasn’t it? I could feel my release coming, ready to burst at any moment, yet somehow Darren knew. He always knew. The bastard could read my own body better than I could. And he loved to torture me with that knowledge because as I bucked and jerked from the impending pleasure, he slowed his tongue to a teasingly slow pace. I could have punched him.

“Darren!” I cried out, my voice agitated and thick with lust as I pleaded with him to finish me.

“You said until you can’t stand it,” he hissed, his tongue dragging agonizingly slow through my folds.

“And I’m there!” I nearly shouted, my back arching from the torture.

“I’m not even close to finished,” he murmured hungrily. He had me going, and now, he wanted to take his time. Well, fine. I could play this game.

Leaning back just a little, my hand grazed against the giant bulge in his pants, gripping and stroking him just the way he liked. That didn't last very long.

In a split second, Darren had propelled himself up, taking me and my tortured clit with him until I found myself on my back at the opposite end of the bed. Growling but never wavering from his task, Darren gripped my wrists and held them over my hips, pinning me down while he continued his slow and deliberate onslaught.

I cried out in frustration, doing my best to pull my wrists from his hands, but I knew the only way they would be free is if he allowed them to be. Instead, I was forced to suffer and writhe under him, the pleasure emanating from his tongue driving me fucking mad.

"Please, Darren, please," I begged, my hips attempting to arch up to meet his strokes, but he kept me down. Everything would happen at his pace, when he decided, with zero room for deviation or compromise. I was his to do with as he pleased, and for some reason, I was still fighting that. I was not a toy, and if there was anything I could fight and escape from, it was that. I was more. So much more.

"How badly do you want to come?" he finally asked me.

"More than I want air," I replied, my voice straining under the light pressure of his tongue.

Just then, he sucked my clit into his mouth, and I shuddered from how agonizingly close I was. Just a little more.

"Tell me what I want to hear," he drawled against my scorching flesh before taking a long, thick lick up my slit.

"Oh, God," I moaned. "I belong to you."

Those words were my escape, my key to the heavy door blocking my release, and when they were spoken, it was like the drawbridge had been lowered, and I was free. Free to come as hard and as long as I wanted. And that was exactly what Darren gave me.

Instantly, the pressure of his tongue increased, and he zoned in on every pulsing inch of my pussy. I came in a matter of seconds, pleasure bursting from within until I could barely breathe, and even then Darren did not relent. He pushed me past the brink of the first orgasm until I was screaming from the second. I hadn't even realized Darren had stopped until his face was hovering above mine and his cock buried inside me. And even

then, the pleasure kept coming. His cock honed in on my G-spot, bumping and stroking exactly where he needed to be.

I moaned so loudly I was sure the whole house could hear it. My hands curled around Darren's arms, holding myself together as he pounded into me with enough force to throw me from the bed. And I fucking loved it. After a few more strokes, he lifted one of my legs over his shoulder, giving himself an even deeper angle, and suddenly, everything intensified.

My nails dug into his skin almost purposely, as if I wanted to mark him myself. I knew I'd be feeling this later, and I wanted Darren to have the same reminder when he looked in the mirror. In the midst of it all, my eyes found Darren's, and I couldn't ignore the electrical current flowing between our bodies. Sparks ignited in my head, giving charge to the blood still pumping into my clit, creating the most delicious sensitivity. And there it was again—my body on the verge of a third explosion.

"Oh, God!" I moaned, arching myself into him again.

Darren sat up more, placing one foot on the floor and repositioning me so he could fondle my chest without interrupting his pace. He pinched my nipples, rolling them between his thumb and forefinger, and I swore I could taste blood in my mouth. I'd taken me a minute before I realized I had been biting my lip.

"Fuck!" Darren groaned as his thrusts became harder, hinging his own release on mine. And those few extra strokes were all it took for that third orgasm to burst through my already conquered fortress. I could feel my walls clamping around Darren, squeezing him for all he was and nearly shoving him off the edge. We came together, our moans mixing to form one sound of ultimate pleasure. And when it was over, Darren collapsed on top of me, his heated and heavy body covering mine while he drifted from the high of his orgasm.

I was busy catching my breath, trying to calm down from everything that had just happened. Fuck, what have I done?

After a moment, Darren rolled off me, and I quickly excused myself to the bathroom.

When I came back with my teeth and hair brushed, I found Darren packing my cards back into their little box. He'd put on a pair of black sweatpants that hung low on his hips, giving me a perfect view of that hard v of his abdomen. I suddenly felt too exposed and grabbed the black silk

robe hanging from the bedpost, wrapping it around my now cold body. I hunched my shoulders and rubbed my arms for emphasis.

“You didn’t eat your dinner,” Darren said as he sealed the cards into the box.

“Wasn’t hungry,” I replied with a shrug.

“What are the rules?” he countered, his eyes piercing me with a challenge.

I sighed. Fucking five-year-old rules. “Not to leave the table until my plate is clean.”

“And now, you’re not going to leave my lap until it’s clean.”

“Huh?” But that was the only word I got out before he picked me up, threw me over his shoulder, and walked over to the table by the Christmas tree.

I groaned. “One day, I’m going to make you regret picking me up like this.” I always hated being carried this way. It didn’t matter how meaty Darren’s shoulders were. They still pushed into my stomach, and it was beyond uncomfortable.

“And you’ll regret it even more if you try,” he said, swatting me on the ass.

I rolled my eyes. He couldn’t see them from back here.

It only took him a few strides to get to the table, lowering me onto his lap as he sat down. Darren then lifted the lid to my dinner to reveal roasted chicken and potatoes and mixed vegetables. Working around me, he cut everything into tiny bites, and I couldn’t help but smile. It was kind of funny that he was taking into consideration I preferred my bites smaller than his. He forked a piece of chicken and held it up to my lips.

“Open,” he ordered.

I complied and parted my lips to take his offering. Even though the chicken was now lukewarm, it was still damn good. I chewed quickly while he began spearing a few vegetables with the fork.

“I can feed myself, you know,” I muttered, covering my mouth with my hand as I swallowed.

“Obviously not. Now open.”

Pursing my lips in protest, I let it go and opened them to accept the veggies. They were crunchy and a bit salty—just the way I liked them. Darren feeding me like this was strange. I almost felt pampered, like a precious thing to be cared for and cherished, and I didn’t know if I liked it. I

was too independent for this kind of shit. But whatever; he was being nice to me, so I should accept it.

Darren held another forkful of potatoes to my lips, but I covered my mouth, swallowing the last bite I could muster before my stomach burst. I shook my head.

“I can’t take another bite. I’m so full,” I pleaded. Only a few bites were left on my plate, but I had already pushed myself past my limit. This chef overestimated how much I could eat.

“Please?” Darren pressed, but it was nice in his own way. His voice held concern, but there was a bit of humor in his plead.

“Only because you actually said please,” I said carefully and opened my mouth to close it around the fork.

“Good girl,” he praised, kissing me at the temple. “Now, it’s bath time.”

“Bath time?” I replied, looking at him confused.

“Yes,” he said and then stood, easily lifting me into his arms and carrying me to the bathroom.

I groaned again. “Ugh, you know, I can walk, too,” I complained.

Darren ignored my comment and set me down on the bathroom counter. “You’ll walk when I allow it,” he replied and then turned his back to turn the faucet of the Jacuzzi tub on.

The bathroom was another testament to the house. It kept up the same log cabin details, except for the brown stone tile that bordered the walls near the tub and shower stall. The tub sat in front of a large bay window while a skylight in the ceiling gave a perfect view of the night sky.

Opening one of the many cabinets, Darren grabbed some bath oil and poured it into the tub before returning it to the cabinet. When the bath was halfway full, I took the initiative of removing my robe and hopping off the counter while Darren removed his pants. I headed over to the bathtub, knowing I’d end up in it anyway. Might as well be on my terms. But the moment I took a single step forward, Darren stopped me, taking my body in his arms and blocking me.

“What did I just say?” he nearly growled. I felt my eyebrows shoot up.

“Seriously?”

Darren responded by picking me up, again, and cradled me against his chest as he strode over to the tub. “Seriously,” he replied and stepped into the tub. Gently easing us into the tub, Darren placed me between his legs and pulled my shoulders back to rest my head against his chest. I released a

heavy breath and relaxed into his body. When the tub was filled, he turned it off and relaxed again. His hands trailed against my wet skin, his fingers tracing lines along my arms, creating little goose bumps in their wake. The water was warm and scented with lavender, the scent filling my nose and calming me immediately. I almost wanted to fall asleep right there, but then I felt him nudge me forward.

“Dunk your hair under the water,” he said. I did as he asked, inching myself forward so I could lay back and dunk my head in the warm water. After it was wet, Darren shampooed and conditioned my hair, his strong fingers massaging my scalp and nearly making me purr out loud. When he was done, and my hair was rinsed, he laid me back against him, resting on his chest once more. I hated to admit it, but it felt nice. He was so solid behind me, but somehow, just as comfortable. I found myself pressing my cheek into one of his pecs as he stroked my arm, his bare knuckles leaving soft lines against my skin. I closed my eyes just for a moment and realized if I gave in to the exhaustion taking over, I’d fall asleep in the damn tub.

“What time is it?” I asked, my voice low and sleepy.

“Just after midnight,” Darren said.

“Mmm... Merry Christmas,” I mumbled. Darren kissed me on the top of the head and then got out, pulling me up with him.

“Come on. It’s time for bed. I’ve kept you up too late to begin with.”

“Agreed,” I said with a yawn.

Darren pulled me out of the tub, dried my hair and body with fluffy white towels, and then naturally, carried my ass to bed. This time, I didn’t protest. Tucking me against his side and under the sheets, Darren reached over to turn off the lights, the only lights now coming from the dying fire in the fireplace and the Christmas tree. Darren’s warmth behind me, mixed with the softness of the sheets and the scent of lavender knocked me out in a matter of seconds. Tomorrow, I’d see how well Darren could celebrate Christmas. It would be an interesting day.

34

CHRISTMAS MORNING

I woke up with a burst, my blood rushing through my veins and my breathing becoming uneven. And then I suddenly became very aware of the pleasure occurring between my legs. The soft wet strokes of Darren's tongue lapping at my clit waking me up was one hell of an alarm clock. I went to pull my arms down, my hands intent on finding something to grasp, but I realized I couldn't move them from above my head.

I was about to panic until Darren sucked my clit into his mouth, and I couldn't help but moan, arching my back and tugging even harder against my restraints. In a matter of seconds, my orgasm took over, shattering my resolve and awakening my body to the fullest.

When it was over, and my body calmed from the high, I felt Darren trail kisses up my abdomen and between my breasts before he exposed that dazzling shark grin of his. "Merry Christmas," he said, that smile awakening the morning butterflies in my stomach.

"Merry Christmas," I replied with a heavy breath.

Just then, a knock on the door came, and I felt myself tug against my restraints again.

"Don't move," he said with a smirk, bopping my nose before getting up from the bed and heading into the bathroom. I heard the water run for a few seconds before he came out with a pair of sweatpants on and answered the door.

Drawing my legs up to cover myself just in case, I continued to tug at my restraints, hoping they might give just a little, but they never did. It felt like my cuffs were attached to something stringy—rope maybe?

Darren came over to my side of the bed, bringing with him the scent of bacon and cinnamon. He had a silver tray in his hands and set it down on the end table next to us.

“Open your legs, Jaden,” he said, but the tone of his voice, though gentle, left no room for argument. Noticing he’d picked up a napkin, I’d hoped he planned to clean up the mess he’d recently made of me. Biting my lip, I complied, slowing spread my knees and allowing him to clean up his saliva as well as my cum. I gasped from the rough texture of the napkin but felt much better knowing the stickiness was gone, and I was clean. I was still a bit sore from the night before, but I’d forgot it all thanks to the masterful talents of Darren’s tongue.

Once I was clean, Darren disposed of the napkin and turned his attention back to the tray.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Well, I just had my breakfast,” he said with a smirk. “It’s time you had yours.”

“Breakfast in bed, huh?”

“That’s right.”

Lifting the lid, my mouth instantly watered at the sight of scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, French toast, and a small bowl of raspberries. There was also a cup of green tea and a glass of orange juice. Darren speared a few scrambled eggs with the fork and brought it over to my mouth.

“Open,” he said.

“Oh, come on! You don’t have to force feed me. I’ll eat, I promise,” I whined.

“Open. Your. Mouth,” he reiterated, that glare quickly becoming uncompromising.

I sighed and finally opened my mouth to accept the eggs. I chewed quickly so I could speak again.

“Do I have to be restrained to eat my breakfast?”

“I don’t know, do you?” Darren asked as he brought the fork speared with a small cutout of French toast to my lips. I took it between my lips without hesitation.

“I don’t think so,” I answered, trying to sound as innocent as possible.

“If you can get through half of it, I’ll let you up.”

I sighed in defeat. It was the best I was going to get. So I opened my mouth to accept the next several delicious bites without complaint. It didn't take long before I could feel myself getting full, but I wanted the fuck out of these bonds like now.

"Okay, I'm satisfied for now," Darren declared and pulled his phone out of his pocket to unlock my cuffs.

Sliding my arms down, I sat up, rolling my shoulders and stretching my arms forward until my spine cracked. Darren popped a raspberry in his mouth and then stood.

"I'm going to take a shower. When I get back, I expect everything to be gone," he ordered and then kissed me on top of the head before walking over toward the bathroom.

"Everything?" I reiterated loud enough so he could hear me. I still had a lot of work to do.

"Everything," he answered and then shut the bathroom door behind him.

"Fuck," I whispered under my breath.

I finished off the bowl of raspberries easily enough, chomped down the last strip of bacon, polished off the small portion of remaining scrambled eggs, but I was seriously hitting the wall trying to finish the last bit of hash browns and two small cut pieces of French toast. The stress of my captivity had been making my stomach shrink since the beginning, and my time on the island with a broken jaw didn't help much. Darren was obviously trying to rectify that.

When he finally emerged from the shower fifteen minutes later, I still had the French toast left. He walked over with a towel wrapped around his waist, water droplets still fresh as they dripped down his chest. He smelled impeccable. He'd shaved and combed his hair to the side so that it swept a little over his brow.

Goddamn.

He took one look at my plates and shook his head, turning and heading for the walk-in closet. "Keep going," he ordered.

I groaned, took a big breath, and shoved one of the pieces of French toast in my mouth, chewing slowly and hoping I didn't chuck everything back up. When Darren came back out of the closet a few moments later, he was dressed in a thick black turtleneck sweater and dark jeans with black

leather dress shoes. I hated how easy it was for him to look as sexy as he did all the time.

Darren came back around to where I was perched on the bed, my chin resting on my knee as I finished chewing, and regarded my tray again. He picked up the fork, speared the toast, and placed it in front of my lips. I groaned again.

“Come on,” Darren prompted.

I parted my lips and took the final piece in my mouth, chewing as slowly as possible to keep everything down.

“Good girl,” he said and set the fork down. “Go freshen up and meet me downstairs in fifteen minutes.” He headed for the door before ultimately turning around for one last order. “Oh, and I want that orange juice gone, too,” he said and then walked out the door.

I looked over at the orange juice and almost considered just pouring it down the drain in the bathroom, but like my bedroom, I was sure cameras were installed in here, too. I officially assumed now that no matter what I was doing or where I was, someone was always watching me.

Getting up from the bed, I took a sip of the orange juice and headed into the bathroom. I used the toilet, gave myself a better cleanup job after Darren’s wake-up call this morning, washed my face, brushed my hair and teeth, and put my hair up in a high ponytail. With only fifteen minutes, I didn’t have much time to style it. Heading over to the walk-in, I put on a bra, a dark purple sweater dress with long sleeves, and black fleece-lined leggings. I pulled on the comfy, warm slipper boots and then left the room. Romero and Alex were standing just outside my door, waiting for me.

“Merry Christmas,” I said to them as they escorted me down the hall. They just gave me a curt nod. I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t you guys have family to be with?” I asked them as we descended the stairs.

“No, ma’am,” Romero replied, and that was the end of the conversation because Darren appeared around the corner.

Darren took my hand and led me into the great room, but I couldn’t help but linger on the thought that the guards and probably many of the people Darren employed didn’t likely get any time off from their duties, even for the holidays. But Clive and Owen weren’t here, so maybe there was a rotation? I wondered if Darren would disclose.

He kept a good grip on my hand as we walked through the room and rounded the couch to sit down. That was when I noticed all the presents

under the tree, wrapped by what looked like absolute professionals. They had hand-tied bows and ribbons, perfectly proportioned wrappings, all done in beautiful colors of red, green, gold, silver, and blue. Some boxes were bigger than others were, some rectangular, some square. I blanched when I realized they were likely all for me and looked up at Darren's smirking face for confirmation.

"That cannot all be for me," I said, as I plopped down on the couch.

"Oh, yes," he confirmed. "I finally get to spoil you."

You could spoil me with freedom...

"Spoil me? Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," he said as he bent down to lift a present from under the tree. He sat down on the floor next to the tree, his arm casually draped over his raised knee, and handed me the gift. Begrudgingly, I took the present and placed it in my lap, pursing my lips as I hesitated to open it. This just felt... off.

"What's wrong now?" Darren asked, his eyes dark as he watched me.

Fuck, I did not want to get into a fight now.

"It's nothing," I said, making sure I made eye contact with him. I tried to give a small smile to assure nothing was wrong, but I knew he wouldn't buy it.

"Jaden," he warned. That was my cue to give him the answer he wanted.

I sniffled, looking down at the small square present in my hands. "I just didn't expect all this. I'm not sure how I feel about it." More gifts from him I didn't want to accept.

If there was one thing I could feel, it was anger steaming from Darren's body. After a few moments, he released a heavy breath and relaxed against the end of the couch.

"I actually went to a lot of trouble for all this. To try to make you happy. The least you could do is let me enjoy it just a little while I watch you open your Christmas presents."

Classic guilt trip.

I sighed, knowing I sounded like an ungrateful bitch, but I should have been sharing this special morning with Jason, with my actual family. Darren wouldn't understand that; instead, he'd just punish me for it.

Biting my lip, I tossed my grief out the window and tentatively began to tear away at the wrapping paper surrounding the box. I couldn't have

missed the smile on Darren's face if I tried. He absentmindedly took the paper from me and crumpled it into a tiny ball and placed it in a trash bag nearby. The name Rolex appeared on the small square box in my hands, and my breath hitched when I opened it to find a sterling silver watch with a hot pink sparkly face. I almost laughed.

"You know; I'm beginning to think you're the one with the unhealthy obsession with pink," I said, a smartass smile on my face.

"What? I like you in pink," he dejected.

"Why? Because it's considered girly?"

"Yeah, so? It looks nice."

"Women are not defined by a single color, you know," I said as I set the box down on the coffee table in front of me.

"Yeah, yeah, stop arguing," he said as he reached over and handed me another gift.

I spent the next hour opening presents from him. He'd gotten me lots of jewelry, even though I probably wouldn't wear any of it unless requested. I didn't even know where I would wear half the shit he got me. He'd gotten me clothes I could take back to the estate—some new dresses, some fancy, some casual—but the best part were the little black, pink, and white spandex shorts for my workouts. Finally, something useful. I fucking hated those stupid-ass skorts. He also got me a new pair of Nikes, since mine were beginning to wear already, and the weight gloves he promised me a few weeks ago.

Darren surprised me when he said Scott had a gift for me. It was a colorful hacky sack, and I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Ha! Now, this brings back memories," I said with a genuine smile.

I used to play hacky sack with some guy friends during my undergraduate days while we waited for class to start. They were impressed I could kick the sack at weird angles they couldn't even comprehend. That was where I was able to improve my scorpion kick. I planned to spend a lot of time with this little gift.

When all was said and done, I thought all the presents were opened, but Darren still had one hiding in the branches of the tree. This present was tiny, just fitting in the palm of my hand. I pulled the wrapping away to find a small ring box, and I felt my stomach immediately rip apart.

Oh, God, no...

Like defusing a bomb, I pulled the lid to the box back and breathed a slight sigh of relief when I saw it was only my old Tiffany's infinity ring that Darren had given me months ago. I'd been wearing it when I'd escaped but woke up without it on the island. I hadn't even wondered what happened to it, too happy it was off my finger. And now, it was back.

I stared at the ring until Darren finally got up to sit next to me, pulled the ring out of the box, and placed it on my left hand. He then kissed me on the temple.

"Back where it belongs," he said, but there was no mistaking the warning in his tone. "Just like you."

I gulped back the sickness in my stomach. The joy was so real...

"I didn't get you anything," I said, hoping to change the subject.

"Oh, but you did," Darren said, that shark grin reappearing again. "And I'm going to love it."

Fantastic.

"I'm sure you will," I said carefully.

"Now," he said, slapping my knee playfully and getting up. "There's just one gift left."

"Still?" I asked him as he walked out of the room and down one of the halls. I couldn't believe he still had more bullshit to give me. As if I didn't have enough.

A few moments later, he came back holding a large box that looked like a wrapped present in his arms and sat down on the couch, placing the box in front of me. I moved closer to examine the box when it suddenly moved on its own. I immediately pulled myself back.

"Why is it moving?" I asked, looking at Darren who seemed perfectly pleased with himself.

"Just open it," he urged.

Just then, I heard a muffled little yelp come from the box. Was that a bark? Gripping the lid of the box, I cautiously pulled it up and leaned forward to look inside. My heart instantly swelled, and my eyes grew wide with unabashed excitement and then immediate confusion.

"You got me a puppy?"



I had to admit Jaden's tone of voice was not what I initially expected. I'd expected immediate swoon and giddiness, but I should have learned never to expect the expected with her. She was definitely excited, but she was so reserved now; she never fully gave in to all her emotions unless it was anger and directed at me. It was difficult for her to give into happiness and excitement, and I understood this, but... come on! This was a fucking puppy! Girls were supposed to love puppies.

"You said you were lonely," I answered. "I hope this is a satisfying compromise."

She looked back down at the puppy as it barked in the box, wanting out. It was a purebred twelve-week-old female Rottweiler that I'd personally selected from the breeder in Anchorage yesterday afternoon. It was the first pup that came up to me while all of the siblings continued to play within a safe distance of the mother. But this one was brave as it barked at me, and it immediately reminded me of Jaden. Easy pick.

Jaden timidly reached into the box to lift the puppy and held her in her arms. And there was the swoon I was looking for. I felt triumphant as Jaden finally revealed the smile she had been concealing, and it made me want to kiss her until I couldn't feel my lips anymore.

"So this is my dog now?" Jaden asked, her eyes almost hopeful. "Like a pet?"

I nodded. "She is your responsibility to take care of, but yes. She is your dog."

"It's a girl?" she asked. Now, she was even more excited. I nodded. Jaden needed more estrogen in her life, and the female dog would be easier to train anyway. "How old?"

"Twelve weeks. Do you like her?"

Her mouth wanted to say no. She didn't want to like or appreciate my gifts and generosity, but denying how pleased she was with the dog would be a lie, and she knew that was against my rules.

"Yeah... I do," she finally admitted, her eyes never leaving the pup. Swoon.

"Good. Now, what do you say?" I didn't care if she didn't want my gifts or attention. She'd be grateful for them because I didn't have to be this way with her. This was a privilege; one that she needed to respect.

"Thank you," she eventually said, turning her head to look me in the eyes like she was supposed to.

"You're welcome."

I watched Jaden for a moment as she petted the dog in her arms. This. Was. Adorable.

"What are you going to name her?" I asked.

She squinted for a moment as she looked at the dog. "I don't know," she replied. "I'll have to think of something."

"You should know she won't be just a pet. That dog will also be your guard dog. When we go home, she will undergo specific training not only to protect you but also to kill your would-be attackers. She'll learn discipline, basic and advanced commands, and she will learn to anticipate danger in all forms."

Jaden turned her eyes back to me, her brows furrowed as she took in my words.

"Jeez, will she still know how to play, at least?"

"Of course, but your safety takes precedent. If she senses a threat, she will react accordingly and get you to safety."

"Don't I have enough babysitters?" she complained. I almost laughed because it was almost true.

"No such thing," I responded. Jaden could have an entire army with her, and I still wouldn't feel like she was safe enough. But once the dog was full grown and trained, there would be one less shadow in the room.

Jaden's face remained the same until something seemed to click in her eyes.

"She's for all the places Clive and Owen can't go," she stated, like she already knew the answer.

"Correct," I answered with a nod.

The dog started to struggle in her arms, and Jaden released her, setting her down on the couch, but she wanted to play and jumped down to the floor, taking off down the hall.

"You'd better go get her," I ordered, nodding toward the direction the pup ran off to.

"Dammit." Jaden cussed under her breath and went off to find the dog.

I decided to let Jaden have some fun with her new companion and headed to my office to finish some work. The staff would take her gifts and put them in our room where all the dog toys and things were being set up.

I passed Romero and Alex in the hall, giving them the nod to pursue their watch over Jaden and headed for my office. It didn't matter that it was Christmas; something always needed to be done, and sometimes, I was grateful for it. Some days, I wanted to immerse myself in my work because I honestly loved it, but Jaden would never understand it. If it wasn't work or Jaden preoccupying me, it was training or the occasional tune-up of my bikes or cars.

Sid was the one who convinced me to get Jaden the dog in the first place, more specifically a puppy. The dog would not only provide her the companionship she needed without compromising her safety, but it would also serve as another source of protection for her, which was really the only reason I agreed. She could focus on something else that would more than likely bring her joy rather than plot her revenge against me. She'd have another purpose besides making my dick happy, but she always managed to do more than that, especially when she wasn't even trying.

I appreciated the times when she did try, when she'd put effort into listening to me and making me happy, but it was only because she didn't want to piss me off instead. Whatever worked. Eventually, she'd learn that keeping me happy would essentially keep her happy. The more she obeyed, the more I would reward her, though I had to admit there were those special days when I wanted a fight. I did want her happy, though. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered with the trouble of all this shit for the holidays.

The smile on her face when she finally gave into that puppy was worth it all. God, it was gorgeous when it was genuine. Even the look she got in her eyes as she roamed over the view of the mountains was the exact look I'd hoped to see. It was the look of captivation, the look of joy, even if it was only for a moment.

The dog would help; it had to. What girl didn't melt from a fucking puppy?

I found myself wanting to create some excitement in her life, something for her to take enjoyment in besides beating the shit out of my punching bags, but I knew she was averse to this. Revenge was her purpose. I needed to give her a new one.

She was surprisingly responding well enough to all the gifts and the luxury I was surrounding her with for the holidays. She accepted everything that was given to her, regardless of how begrudgingly she did so. She wanted to appear grateful, but she wasn't very good at it. She would be eventually.

Opening the door to my office, my phone rang in my hand, Dan calling on the other end.

"Dan," I answered as I walked over to my desk.

"Merry Christmas, brother," he said, his voice only barely hiding the excitement he held. "I've got news for you."

"Do tell."

"We learned the sex of the baby," he announced.

"And?"

"It's a girl," he said proudly.

"Congratulations," I replied, but it was really nothing to congratulate him about.

The only use a girl had in our family was as a bartering tool. Marrying them off was usually reserved for extending or strengthening alliances by combining the families. Marrying outside our realms was ill advised, as bringing in someone from the outside world didn't mix well with ours. It was too risky. Those women weren't built for the corruption or the brutality that we lived in like our own women were. They were just as dark and manipulative as the rest of us, which made them ideal companions. But there were some people, like myself, who loved to break the rules.

The problem with the woman of our world was that they were materialistic and selfish thanks to the lavish life they'd grown up in. Most

of them were stuck-up, idiotic and needy, but always gorgeous, and most men in my world enjoyed that, especially when it came to the bedroom. Not me. The more time I spent with Jaden, the less I wanted those women. I wanted her intelligence, her strength, and her ferocity. Even if she was six inches shorter than most of the women in my world, she still had the best body I'd ever seen.

"We're planning a baby shower in early January. Make sure you're there."

"Of course."

"Maybe by then you can bring your little ruby around," he said with a chuckle.

"We'll see." Jaden would likely hate it, and I'd probably find it hilarious. But I had to make sure her behavior was in check first.

"Is she enjoying Anchorage?"

"More than she's letting on. I just gave her the dog a few minutes ago."

"She like it?"

"She doesn't want to, but she does."

"She'll adjust eventually. It took Katherine a while to adjust to me, but she eventually came around."

Eventually but not as easily. Katherine was much more meek and agreeable than Jaden was thanks to what we did to her family so many years ago. Jaden would accept her life sooner or later, once she was done beating herself up for it.

"Katherine is not Jaden," I replied, my tone stronger than I intended for it to be.

"I know, but they're still human. And humans eventually break."

"I'm aware, but... I don't know if I *want* to break this one."

"What do you mean?"

"I only want her to accept her life with me. I want her loyalty just as much as I want her sass. It's honestly too adorable to destroy. Too much fun."

"Ha! Now, who'd have thought that? You've been breaking slaves since you were sixteen, and now, you can't seem to bypass this one. What gives?"

Dan had a point. Breaking the slave girls at the warehouse was one of my first jobs when my father had finally brought me in under his wing. I'd started by bringing the girls to their knees before graduating to the men who owed my father money. That was when I first learned of the metallic taste

of control and how powerful it was, how addictive it was. I loved the fear in their eyes as they cowered before me, the shiver in their bodies from terror, and the thin sheet of sweat that blanketed them when they realized how helpless they were. I couldn't deny the god-like feeling that came over me when I finally put them out of their misery. Weakness disgusted me. It was useless and only guaranteed one thing—no survivors.

Jaden was none of that, which was why I couldn't help but respect her for it. After everything I'd already put her through, she was still fighting. Maybe not always physically, but her determination to thrive in spite of me was relentless and admirable. And I didn't think I wanted to crush it to dust as much as I thought I would. I wanted her to obey me always and without question, but I loved the fight in her far too much to let it die. It made her strong, and in my world, I needed her to be strong.

"I don't know what to tell you, Dan. Some days, I want sugar, and some days, I want spice. I don't know how else to explain it. Jaden challenges me. And you know how much I love a challenge."

"Yes, I do, but I also know what happens once you conquer it."

"This is a different type of conquest. I'm not worried."

"I hope so, for Jaden's sake."

36

LIGHT HEART



I finally caught up to that damn dog when she cornered herself in one of the spare bedrooms. She barked and growled, getting low on her front paws as she tried to fight me. The irony was not lost on me, and I wondered if Darren was going to poke fun at it later. I wouldn't put it past him. I picked up the puppy, and she fought for only a moment until I held her tight enough for her to relax. As soon as I turned around, I found Romero and Alex standing in the doorway, watching me.

"I assume Darren has retreated somewhere," I said as I walked toward them and into the hallway.

"Yes, ma'am. He will see you at dinner."

So I was still to be left alone even on Christmas. Well, good; I'd had enough of Darren this morning anyway, but I had no idea what to do with the puppy. Did she need to go outside at some point or something? I'd never actually had a dog before or any pet for that matter. Never had the time or the patience.

"So what am I supposed to do with her?" I asked.

Romero glanced at it for only a second before returning his eyes to me. He clearly wasn't affected by her puppy cuteness.

"I don't know. It's your dog. All the supplies for her care are up in your room."

"Okay. I guess I'll go check that out then."

When we got back to the room, Romero was right about there being a shit ton of stuff for my new puppy. There was a crate, a bed, toys, food, leashes, an adorable puffy puppy coat, cleaning supplies, and a potty bin complete with puppy pads. No collar, though, which I thought was weird.

Setting the puppy down, she instantly raced off to the other end of the room while I began to set up her crate, bed, and potty bin. She barked, growled, and played with the bear rug while I organized everything until she ran up and began tugging on my sweater dress. Grabbing one of her toys, a long, sturdy tug-of-war rope, I placed it near her mouth, and her little teeth clamped on it almost immediately. She tugged and tugged on it, jerking her head and her body until I eventually let go to let her have it. She chewed on it while I watched for a moment. She was so fucking cute. I hated it.

Every now and then, she'd forget the toy and run around some more, racing from one end of the room to the other, barking at me and basically anything she could lay her eyes on until I finally got up to play with her. She pawed at me, gnawed on my hands without leaving a mark, and when she grew tired, curled in my lap and fell asleep. Instant melt. Damn Darren and his stupid manipulation. Out of all of them, I liked this one the most, and I fucking hated it.

Leaning against the wall, my hands caressed the puppy's fur, relishing in her softness and enjoying the heat she provided to my legs. But as I petted her fine black fur, my eyes couldn't help but linger on the infinity ring that once again claimed the space on my left-hand ring finger.

I wanted to rip it off and chuck it across the room, but I remembered that it was to never leave that finger. The diamonds glittered in the light, mimicking the same ones that adorned my wrists, ankles, and neck. I doubted I would ever appreciate diamonds again. They were meant to be pretty, admired, and cherished, but the only thing they did was fail at distracting me from the chains they tried to conceal. The ones that shackled me to this life, to Darren.

I didn't understand why he wanted to decorate me with diamonds; they were just carbon forced under severe pressure and heat. The results were something beautiful, but it took a lot of bullshit to get there. Maybe that was how Darren saw me. His pure black carbon specimen that he was slowly converting into his perfect little diamond.

Motherfucker, I was already a diamond. Good luck breaking the hardest substance in the world.

Not wanting to get myself worked up, I let the anger go. I had a full stomach, a roof over my head, clothes, unbruised skin, and a puppy in my lap. I deserved one small moment that didn't reflect my anger of Darren. Closing my eyes, I continued to pet my Christmas present until I eventually dozed off.



“Have you decided on a name yet?”

Darren and I were sitting at the dining room table having lunch together. I had luckily managed to finish my entire bowl of potato soup and half turkey sandwich, which apparently granted me his attention. I thought about Darren's question, screwing up my face so he knew I'd heard him but didn't really have an answer. I had an idea for a name but wasn't settled on it just yet.

I shrugged. “I'm not one-hundred percent sold on it yet, but I was thinking maybe Camaro.”

Darren's eyebrows furrowed. “Why Camaro?”

“Because she's fast like one,” I replied.

He chuckled. “There are faster cars, you know.”

I almost rolled my eyes. “I'm aware, but I don't think Lamborghini or Bugatti have the same ring to it.”

That wasn't the real reason. It was really because my grandma had an old 1969 Camaro ZL-1 that she and my grandpa had bought together as an anniversary present for each other. My grandpa passed away two years ago, and my grandma knew how much I loved that car. On occasion, my grandpa and my dad would let me help tweak the engine when I was younger. I had fond memories of that car, and my grandma knew it. So it was going to be a wedding present to me whenever Jason and I finally planned to get married. We were gonna drive off in the old thing, dragging cans and shit behind us. So much for that.

Darren shrugged. “Whatever you want. I like Camaro.”

Maybe that was the approval I needed... Camaro it is, then.

“Can I take her outside?” I asked.

It took Darren only a second to think about it as he pushed his now empty plate away from him. “Sure, as long as you take your guards with you, and you stay within the lining of the trees. No going beyond them.”

“Okay,” I promised.

Darren stood from his chair and kissed the top of my head. “I have work to do. I’ll see you at dinner.”

When he was gone, I slid out from my chair and headed back to my room to get Camaro and change. She was sleeping in her crate next to her slightly empty dog bowl when I came in, but she quickly woke when she heard me rustling around in the closet. I put on a pair of snow pants and boots, my coat, hat, and gloves then grabbed one of the leashes and snow coats. Camaro yipped and whined as I came toward her crate, pulling her out and wrestling with her to get the coat on. Once I had it zipped up, she continued to bite at it while I wrapped the leash around her neck and clipped the end.

Why hadn’t Darren gotten her a collar? I forgot to ask him that at lunch.

Picking her up, I carried her out of the room and out into the hall, Romero and Alex trailing behind automatically. They actually had their coats on this time, so they were prepared when I headed for the sliding doors downstairs. Stepping onto the patio, I set Camaro in the snow, and she immediately started to run and play in the snow. I kept a good hold on the leash but still tried to keep up with her, so I didn’t tug too hard. I didn’t want to lose her in the trees.

We spent a good hour and a half out there, playing and exploring. She was a curious and energetic puppy, and the longer I played with her, the more the name seemed to fit. She was so damn cute and feisty. I loved it.

“Miss Jaden,” Romero called. “It’s time to go in. You need to get ready for dinner.”

“Booooo,” I whined but complied. I picked Camaro up and carried her back into the house and up to the bedroom. Placing her on the ground, I took off her coat and leash and let her run around the room for a while. I then glanced over to find clothes had been laid out on the bed. I walked over to find a lacy tight looking red dress that would likely stop just before my knees and a pair of sparkly red stilettos. When I lifted the dress to examine the material, noticing just how low the neckline was, I found Darren’s Christmas present to himself hiding underneath. Fire engine red lace lingerie. It was a matching bra and thong set with a matching garter

belt and nude thigh highs. The bra contained strings at the front, tying the two cups together and inevitably forming a bow. Ha-ha.

Merry Christmas to him...

I left the clothes where they were and headed for the bathroom for a shower. Afterward, I curled my hair and did my makeup, giving myself a soft smoky eye and dark red lip. Slipping into the lingerie and clipping on the nude stockings, I checked myself out in the bathroom mirror. Fuck, I looked hot, like stripper hot. Maybe I'd play this to my advantage. Maybe I'd be the one to bring Darren to his knees for once.

Heading over to the bed, I slipped the dress and heels on and went to put Camaro back in her crate with a few of her toys, food, and water. I didn't want her running around biting shit and pissing Darren off. I didn't need that kind of heat. When she settled, I put on some of the new jewelry he'd gotten me that I knew would match nicely

When it was 5:30 p.m., I opened the door to be escorted back down to the dining room, but when I got there, I froze in my tracks. Soft Christmas jazz played in the background while the dining table stood not only decked out with several plates of food, but it was also decorated with more Christmas trimmings and flickering tall red candles, giving it a lovely, warm ambience. It was a feast fit for Whoville. And standing at the head of it all was Darren, his hands resting on the top of his chair as he smiled at me.

"Wow," I said as I walked toward the table, my heels clicking behind me.

"Wow is right," Darren agreed, but his eyes weren't on the table; they were too busy gazing up and down my body. I couldn't help but notice his too. He was in a black suit, white dress shirt, and a red tie that matched my dress almost exactly. I instantly wondered where he'd gotten ready. Maybe he had a separate room somewhere else. After a moment, he walked around to my chair and pulled it out for me. "Have a seat," he said. I didn't argue and allowed him to push my chair in for me.

What the fuck is going on?

"This is a lot of food for just two people," I told Darren as he sat down in his own seat.

"That's because once we're done, the rest will go to the guards."

"Really?" I asked. I didn't know he even gave a shit about them, especially if they still worked on the holidays, but maybe he did?

“Of course. I may pay them very well for what they do, but that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate their loyalty. I try to reward them when I can.”

“Well, that’s... nice of you, I guess.”

Darren gave me a quick wink before we started our dinner. Everything was fantastic. From the turkey to the vegetables and potatoes, salad, roast beef, and cranberries, I’d had more than my fill. I even got to indulge in dessert, which almost never happened. The conversation revolved mostly about Camaro and my fun with her outside. I mentioned to Darren that she didn’t have a collar in her bag of things, and he said he wanted me to pick it out myself, which again, threw me off.

“You want me to pick it out myself?”

“Sure, why not? She’s your dog.”

The irony was closing in on me again. If he thought I was going to react to choosing a collar for my dog like he’d chosen one for me, then he was mistaken. I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort.

“How am I going to pick it out? Are you going to supply me with a bunch to choose from?”

Darren shook his head. “No, I’m going to take you into town on New Year’s Eve for you to pick one out yourself.”

I choked on my wine. He was taking me to town? In public? For fucking real??

“Are you serious?” I asked, trying to keep my eyes from bugging out of my head.

“If you can behave, yes,” he said, that dangerous look looming in his eyes, the one that promised pain if I fucked up.

“No worries,” I assured him, trying to hide my smile as I took another sip of wine.

A half-eaten slice of cherry pie sat on my plate, and I didn’t think I could eat another bite. I’d had two full glasses of white wine and was about to finish my third when I suddenly felt my vision sway. Weird, but maybe I was just excited?

I was finally going out into the world for once in the next few days. I’d see people. I’d see buildings. I’d see everything. Holy. Shit. This meant he trusted me enough to be in public with him... and I was sure there would be devastating consequences should I fuck that up. But I wouldn’t. I’d make sure I had every chance at gaining another opportunity of getting the fuck off Darren’s property.

I took another sip of my wine when I felt myself off balance again.

“What the hell?” I whispered under my breath, placing the glass down. I felt light and airy and fucking giggly.

“Something wrong?” Darren asked me.

I covered my mouth in an attempt to hide my goofy ass smile. What the fuck? Was I tipsy? Off three glasses of wine?

“No,” I said with a giggle. “I’m fine.”

“You’re drunk,” he accused, but there was nothing but amusement in his voice.

“No way. I only had three glasses of wine,” I rationalized.

“That wine is twenty percent, Jaden. Your tolerance is still for shit.”

“Shut up,” I told him with way more attitude than I’d meant to.

“What did you just say?”

Darren’s tone sent shivers down my spine, and I immediately slammed my hands over my mouth. “Oh, my God, I *am* drunk.”

But when I finally had the courage to look back over at Darren, the only thing that was plastered over his face was a dark, dangerous smile.

“Good,” he said.

Son of a bitch.

“Good?”

He nodded. “I had a feeling you would like that wine.”

My eyebrows shot up in confusion. “So you wanted me drunk,” I stated. It wasn’t a question.

He leaned forward, a smirk decorating the corners of his mouth. “Maybe I want another showing of Ludacris.”

“Ha!” I laughed, remembering how ridiculous I must have looked while shaking my ass on top of a pool table to “Move Bitch, Get Out the Way.” “I’m afraid the tour ended for that show quite some time ago. I doubt there will be a repeat.”

“Not drunk enough to dance for me then?” he asked with a chuckle.

I shook my head carefully. “I’ll need the entire bottle for that.”

“You’ll dance with me then,” he stated and then stood.

“Wait, what?” But Darren had already gripped my hand and pulled me from my chair.

Leading me away from the table, he stopped us in the center of the room, took my hand in his, and placed the other on his shoulder. Holding me close, his other hand on my lower back, he began to move us across the

floor. The soft jazz of the Christmas music continued to play in the background, and I found myself dazed and confused. Darren moved well to the music, gently twirling me every now and then, and it just felt effortless to move with him. Naturally, he led well, and I was coordinated enough to follow without issue even with my drunkenness. It was actually... nice.

There was no violence, no animosity, maybe a little confusion and surprise, but in reality, we were just two people dancing to the sound of a soothing piano trio. It made me feel warm and airy inside, and every now and then after a twirl, I'd catch myself smiling like a drunken fool... and it pissed me off. But the alcohol running through my blood had a magical way of suppressing my fear of Darren, and I wanted that feeling to last. I didn't want to be afraid anymore. I wanted to be confident in my ability to stand up to Darren, and maybe if I could amuse him with it, he might just appreciate my bravery.

I knew he didn't want someone passive or robotic so I would have to figure out how to keep him amused, stay unpredictable, and remind him that I was not someone you could fuck with and forget. He wanted himself embedded in my mind? Bitch, not before me.

When the song ended, Darren dipped me, pulling my leg up and holding me up for what felt like several seconds as he looked into my eyes. That possessive look of his was back, but it was softer this time, almost loving. I didn't want to be looked at like that anymore, so I tilted my mouth up and kissed him. He fell into the kiss immediately, clutching me tighter as he pressed his lips to mine. It only took him a second before he lifted me up into his arms, never once breaking the kiss and carrying me off to the stairs. He didn't even need to break away from me once as he took each step, but I couldn't help but wrap my arms around his neck for better positioning.

When we got back to the bedroom and Darren set me down to stand, I decided I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I wanted to give Darren his Christmas present. No. I wanted him to beg for it.

Before we even got to the bed, I turned in Darren's hold, pushed up as far as my toes could go to kiss him again while he began to unravel his tie, but I gripped it in my fist before he could and pulled him back with me.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice sultry with lust.

"Whatever I want," I dared, kissing him more, my tongue pushing itself into his mouth of its own volition.

Darren's hands instantly gripped my hips and pulled me up to straddle him as he took us to the bed. He was already pulling at the zipper on my dress, and I followed suit, nearly ripping the buttons apart on his shirt. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Darren pulled me from his hips and set me to stand between his spread knees.

"Take off your dress," he ordered, his breathing becoming heavier with lust. "For once, I don't want to rip this one."

I returned his request with a smirk and turned on my heels to begin pulling the straps of my already unzipped dress slowly down my arms. I arched my back just a bit to give Darren a better view of my ass before sliding the rest of the dress down to pool at my feet. Lacing my hands through my hair, I turned to face him, but the gaze he gave me nearly knocked me off my feet. I had him hooked completely.

"Fuck," he murmured, his eyes slowly glancing up and down my body. "I take it you're pleased with your Christmas present?"

The alcohol was making me so brave, so confident, and I loved it. I loved not giving a damn about what I was about to do because sober me would feel very guilty.

"Very."

"Good," I said and nearly launched myself at him.

I'd never fucked Darren so hard in my life. I gave him all of my pleasure and did everything I could to tease and please. I sucked him off to the point of near combustion, but he'd pulled out, wanting only to come inside me. And when I fought for the top spot, not once did I make him regret it. For once, I was the one who rocked his world. I made him moan. I made him writhe. I made him come like there was no tomorrow; and the power that soared through my veins from that alone was all I needed to get myself off, even though Darren still wanted a say in it. I reminded him that he might be the dealer holding all of the cards, but I was not a normal player—even the dealer could get served every once in a while.

I'd managed to catch a small glimpse of Camaro every now and then as she remained fast asleep in her crate. I had no idea how she'd slept through all the noise, but she had. And thank God for that. A whining puppy would have ruined it.

I fell asleep on Darren's chest that night far more satisfied than I had ever been, especially because five minutes after I finished fucking his brains out, he fell asleep while still buried deep inside me. I had no choice

but to lay there until he eventually rolled over to pull me on top of him. After exhausting myself as Darren's Christmas present, I snuggled deeper into his side, wrapping my arm around his torso until I melted enough to pass right the eff out.

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I felt warm, warmer than I'd ever felt before. And I knew exactly where that warmth was coming from. I opened my eyes to find Jaden's sleeping form draped across my chest. My nose was resting against her hair, allowing me to inhale the soft floral scent I loved so much. She felt so good against me, so perfect, like a puzzle piece that was always supposed to be there. And she was one hell of a puzzle.

Last night had been a complete surprise, and I wasn't one for those. I honestly didn't know what was more surprising—the fact that Jaden had taken control or the fact that I had let her. In truth, I was curious to see what she'd do. Booze always seemed to be Jaden's liquid courage, though it certainly had its backlashes when it disintegrated the filter in her mouth. But her smart mouth was worth the bridge we crossed last night.

Jaden had opened up far more than anticipated. It was clear she was made for leadership roles, which made it more evident as to why she wasn't very good at doing what she was told. She liked to be in charge, and fuck if she wasn't good at it. I liked that she could stand up to me, but there were still times when she needed to remember her place. And the bedroom was likely the only place I'd allow such deviation.

Jaden stirred in her sleep, sucking in a breath before snuggling deeper into me. I'd never seen something that could be so adorable, fierce, and sexy all in the same package. She was everything I wanted and more, and she was finally coming around. Getting her to admit her desire had been a

struggle, but now that she accepted it, we were one step closer to the emotional desire. In time, it would come; I just needed to be patient.

I laid there with Jaden for another half hour just stroking her skin and savoring the softness of her body, but seven a.m. was quickly approaching and, like always, I had shit to take care of. Carefully easing myself out from under Jaden, I pulled the covers back over her shoulders and watched her ease onto my pillow. Once her breathing evened, I changed into my workout gear, grabbed my phone, and headed down to the gym.

Scott was already there, curling weights in front of the mirror. I headed over to the end of the room and joined him. We lifted weights together for about an hour and sparred for another hour in the cage. Scott was the best training partner out there; he was the only one who could provide a challenge for me in one-on-one combat. He was the one responsible for training all of our onsite security and hiring trainers for those offsite. We didn't just have guards in our organization; we had soldiers, a necessary requirement for a member of the Triguard. We didn't fuck around with anything. Everyone was armed and trained, no matter who they were. Even my household staff had training.

When Scott and I finished in the gym, we had contracts to review for a new business proposition in Chicago. An associate wanted to overtake a failing hotel on the main strip so he could better launder his drug trafficking finances through it. He wanted me to go in on it because he knew I had the connections to legitimize it. And I did. I could actually use my own hotel down there instead of the apartment I rarely used. At least this way, I'd make money by having a residence there.

When we were finished, I handed Scott the completed paperwork to send off and stood up to stretch.

"Make sure the guns are ready. I'm going for a shower," I said before heading for the door.

"Half hour," Scott said with a nod.

I bypassed him and went straight to my room. Jaden should be up by now. I was letting her sleep in for the holidays to give her another reason to appreciate them, but when I got back to my room, all I heard was yelling.

"I just want to take her outside for a fucking second so she can go to the bathroom!"

"And I told you, you'll have to wait!"

"Listen here, you stupid motherfu—"

"Hey!" I shouted entering the room, cutting Jaden off midsentence. She was red in the face as she stood between Romero and Alex, her arms crossed over her chest. "The fuck is going on?" I was looking directly at Jaden, so she'd know my question was directed at her.

Jaden took a big breath and released it as she tried to calm herself. "I just want to take Camaro out on the balcony for a quick second so she can go to the bathroom. But apparently, I can't step foot out of this room without your permission! I'm sick of this!"

I looked over at Romero and Alex, who also seemed a little frustrated by the situation. "Out," I ordered, nodding toward the door.

"Yes, sir," they said in unison and left, closing the door behind them. Jaden immediately huffed in irritation and walked over to the window, turning her back to me. I looked over at Camaro who was sitting in her bed, chewing on a rope toy.

"Feisty this morning, aren't we?" I said as I stalked toward her.

"Don't undermine me, Darren. I effing hate that."

At least she was substituting her cuss words, but I wouldn't tolerate that kind of behavior.

"You know better than to argue with them like that." My chest was almost pressing into her shoulders as she continued to brood. It was cute, but that didn't mean she was getting a free pass.

"Was my request really so out of line? I was just going to go out on the damn balcony."

Sighing deeply, I placed my hands on her hips and pulled her to me, keeping her back tight against my pecs. "Their job is to watch over you, and your job is to let them. They will not compromise my orders to make you happy. It's for your own good."

"I don't see why it matters. You have a tracker on my collar. There's no point in running again, so why the constant shadows?"

"That collar obviously didn't stop you last time. I told you things were going to get worse. You have no one to blame for this but yourself."

She was quiet for a moment before releasing a long, slow breath. She knew this was the consequence for escaping me, and she needed to accept that.

"For how long?"

I couldn't help but tighten my grip on her. "For as long as I see fit," I said, bending down to kiss her neck. She smelled so damn good.

I could feel her getting angrier by the second, the heat rising from her skin as she continued to brood like it would do her any good. I roughly turned her in my arms to face me, holding onto her upper arms to keep her in place. The glare she sported only made me smile. "Now, if you want to go outside, you'll have to ask me nicely. I may have treated you a lot this week, but that doesn't mean my rules are suddenly forgotten."

She huffed again, releasing the breath through her nose while her mouth formed a tight little line. "Can I please take Camaro outside again?" she asked, trying to sound as nice as she possibly could.

Leaning down, I kissed her on the side of her head, satisfied with her plea. "After lunch, when you've calmed down. You'll stay here until then, understand?"

I could see the strain in her jaw from my response. She was biting her tongue again.

"Yes, Darren," she finally answered.

"Good girl," I said, kissing her again, and headed into the bathroom for a shower.

When I came back out ten minutes later, she was sitting in the reading nook, her headphones in her ears as she stared out the window. Camaro was lying next to her, curled up on her side as Jaden petted her small head. At least, she was quiet for once.

I changed into a sweater and jeans and laced up my boots before striding over to her. Yanking out one of her headphones, Jaden jerked to the side at my interruption but yielded quickly to my advance. I kissed her on the mouth with enough force to push her back before standing back to my full height.

"You're not to go beyond the trees. No more arguing with your guards. I'll see you at dinner."

And with that, I left her there and walked out of the room, catching Romero and Alex just outside the door.

"She can leave the room after she's had her lunch and only if she eats it all. If she goes outside, she stays within the trees."

"Yes, sir," they said, and I continued on my way to find Scott.

I found him sitting at the conference table in my office, loading the two Remington 700 VTRs and ammunition into a black duffle bag.

"What's your quota?" Scott asked as he loaded the last of the ammunition.

“Three or four at the most,” I replied. “Fish and Game said they’ve spotted four in town in the last two weeks. I don’t want them coming near the property.”

“We could just shoot them on sight,” Scott offered.

I smiled. “Now, where’s the fun in that?”

The Department of Natural Resources of Anchorage had officially extended the open season on black bear hunting due to the sudden rise in population, and I intended to solve their problem. I didn’t want to risk the bears coming too close to the property and becoming a danger to Jaden. No doubt, she’d find them fascinating and try to get a better look or protect them while they tried to maul her to death. I wasn’t having that shit, so I planned to take care of it myself. Plus, I enjoyed a good hunt every now and then.

“All set,” Scott said as he zipped up the bag and grabbed his black winter coat from his chair. I grabbed the special tactical gear I kept in my office for hunts like this, grabbed the duffel, and headed out with Scott into the wilderness.

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I couldn't believe this bullshit. All I wanted to do was take Camaro out on the snow-covered balcony so she could go to the bathroom, but no, I had to be stuck here, cleaning up her puppy pads like it was my most favorite thing to do. The second I stepped through the door to the balcony, those two airheads came barging in, barking at me to back away from the door.

I'd thought for a second there might be an actual threat, but when they asked why I'd opened the door and I answered them, that was when all hell broke loose. I was ready to kick Romero in the teeth for how stupid I thought his interpretation of Darren's rules was, but that would have only landed me in more trouble. I was grateful Darren didn't at least undermine me in front of them; that would have been too embarrassing. But the fact that I was being forced to stay here until my lunch before I could go out confirmed who had won that little battle. And that, in and of itself, was fucking embarrassing. I hated being treated like a child, and the more freedom I got, the harder it was to deal with when it was taken away.

Staring at the hands of my new Rolex, I watched the time go by slower than ever. The longer I watched the hands, the more pissed off I became. If Alex and Romero hadn't barged in, I'd be outside already, doing what I wanted to do. Didn't they know I could fuck their world up? I was not someone they wanted on their bad side because I could make their lives hell if I wanted to.

And fuck them. I would.

Until then, I decided to get a little exercise and pulled out the hacky sack Scott had gotten me for Christmas. I bet the asshole didn't even know I knew what the damn thing was in the first place. I plugged in my iPod, turned on some old-school Nelly, and stood in the middle of the room. I dropped the sack to my ankle and immediately started kicking it with the side of my foot, watching it bounce eye level in the air. Back and forth from one foot to the next, I kicked the hacky sack for what felt like hours. It was honestly a fun little game that kept my foot-eye coordination and reflexes intact. I could kick it over my shoulder then back over with the ball of my foot, stall it on my chest, bounce it on my knee, switch feet midair, even scorpion kick the damn thing and have it land on the top of my foot.

Camaro was so engaged; she kept barking and jumping up to catch the sack. I knew if it landed in her mouth, she'd rip it to shreds, so I played Keep-Away for a while. She was fun to play with, and she made the game far more challenging with her running around.

Some time later, my lunch finally came. Romero held the silver tray in his hands as he walked around me still hacking the sack and set the tray on the table. I ignored him as he regarded me still playing and stalled the sack at the top of my chest.

"Well, look at you. You can balance a sack on your tits. That's adorable," he commented.

"Oh, fuck off, Romero," I said, my eyes watching the sack as I pushed my chest forward and kicked it again as it fell toward my foot. I was still pissed at him.

I could feel him walking toward the door, but as he came up next to me, just when I was about to kick the sack midair, he swatted it right out of my path, knocking it to the ground. And that was when I did the smart thing, rechambered my leg, and side kicked him right in the ribs and knocked him on his ass to the floor. Romero fell with a loud thud, his face shocked and confused as his hand wrapped around his side.

"What the fuck!" he shouted from the floor.

"That's what you get for being an asshole all the time!" I shouted.

"How the fuck?" he whispered under his breath as he stared up at me.

I shrugged. "What's the matter? Didn't expect that from a pipsqueak shortcake like me?"

Romero stood, his hand still clutching his side as he glared at me.

"I'll have your outdoor privileges removed," he threatened, his finger pointing at me.

I shook my head at him. "Try it, and I'll have your breathing privileges removed. Go ahead and tell Darren you let me get the drop on you... literally." I smirked.

He snickered, shaking his head and stalked forward toward the door, opening it just enough for him to step through.

"Enjoy the rest of your afternoon. I understand staring out the window is a pastime of yours." And then he slammed the door shut behind him.

Motherfucker!!!

I was not spending the rest of the day locked in this room because of that asshole. He wanted to play games with me? Well, game on, motherfucker.

He was fucking dead.

I charged for the closet to change my clothes and placed my coat, hat, gloves, and Camaro's little coat in a duffel bag and headed into the bathroom, leaving the bag on the counter. Heading back into the bedroom, I calmly ate my lunch, finishing about ninety percent of it and calling it a good effort. Walking back into the bathroom with Camaro in tow, I closed the door and turned on the faucet to the bathtub and began putting on Camaro's coat while it filled.

Once the tub was full, I turned off the faucet and put on my coat, hat, and gloves. Grabbing Camaro, I walked over to the bay window, slid it open and climbed out, jumping a few feet onto the soft padding of the snow. Luckily, no one was around as I placed Camaro on the ground and attached her leash.

Strolling off toward the trees, I wanted to put as much distance between me and that house as possible. I'd probably get in trouble for sneaking off, but I had a feeling those idiots would have it worse, so that made it worth it. Darren said I could go outside after I finished my lunch, and I did that. So as far as I was concerned, I had Darren's permission to go outside. My guards didn't trump him, and it wasn't fair that they thought they could take away something Darren had given me. So fuck them. I wanted them as dead as my freedom was. Besides, it seemed like Darren was trying to sweeten me over a bit, considering this whole trip. He'd ruin it if he brought hell down on me for sneaking away because my guards were assholes. They should have the same standard as a prison if that was going to be the case.

Guards were not encouraged to taunt prisoners; it makes them want to do all kinds of bad shit, but if you treat them nicely and with respect, you'll have a much more compliant prisoner.

As we strolled, I kept a good grip on Camaro's leash. We walked for a good half hour before we finally came close to the trees. I'd adhere to some of Darren's rules and stay within my boundaries. I'd have that to barter over later, if it even mattered. A few minutes later, Camaro started barking at something moving around in the snow. And the moment I turned to look at what it was, I slipped on some hidden ice beneath me and crashed to the ground. My hand instantly loosened around the leash, and that was when Camaro took off running into the trees.

"Shit! Camaro, no!" I shouted, clutching my side and running after her. The snow was deep and thick, but Camaro was light enough to run through it while my footsteps sunk deep in the snow, making it difficult to keep up. "Camaro, stop!"

We were deep in the trees now as I tried to catch up to her, running as fast and as hard as I could. If I lost her out here, I didn't know what I would do, but I didn't want to find out. Eventually, she finally stopped at a random tree to bark at the damn critter as it climbed up the tree.

"Camaro!" I yelled, gripping her leash and pulling her to me. "No! Bad!" I yelled as I clutched her to my chest, attempting to catch my breath. She squirmed in my arms for a moment before she finally relaxed and licked my face. I sighed. "Please don't cause any more problems for me. You've done enough already."

I turned my back and headed toward the house, but the sound of a low deep growl had me stopping right in my tracks. I felt my blood freeze in my veins, and my senses went wild as a second growl reverberated through my entire body.

Slowly as possible, I turned my head to the side, and my knees nearly buckled. Behind me was a very large, very angry looking pack of wolves. There were six of them in total, most of them a mixture of gray fur while the alpha displayed a heavy coat blacker than night. Teeth bared, ears back, and eyes directly on me, the alpha of the pack gave every indication it was officially on the hunt. It snarled as Camaro cowered in my arms, and I felt myself stumble back.

"Oh. Fuck."

The alpha wolf approached slowly, that same dark approach I recognized in another predator I knew so well. I could actually smell the death on its hot breath as it came closer. I backed away as slowly as I could, barely able to breathe myself as I kept Camaro tightly in my arms. The remaining wolves snarled and dug their paws into the snow as they advanced with their alpha, reminding me of how outnumbered I was.

Suddenly, I felt more stupid than I ever had in my life. I had no weapon, nothing I could use to fight them off other than my bare hands, and zero backup that usually came equipped with fire power. And here I was, about to die a very horrible, painful death by my favorite animal, all because I wanted to see my asshole guards six feet under. And now, I was about to take their place.

I was such a fucking idiot.

Staying out of the trees as Darren had said suddenly made sense now, but I would have actually heeded his warning better if I had known there were fucking wolves out here! I probably wouldn't have gone outside in the first place! Fuck!

I took another step back, and the growl that left the alpha's mouth had me shaking in fear. I'd never regretted sneaking out more in my life. Taking several steps toward me, its big paws pressing into the frozen ground, my eyes made the mistake of noticing the giant claws that cut through the snow. My heart was ready to beat right out of my chest, right onto a silver platter for the pack to feast on. I wanted to run, but for once, running was definitely not an option. They would rip Camaro and me to shreds. On the bright side, I'd finally be rid of Darren, but I'd also be dead as fuck, so that didn't really help the situation.

For the first time ever, I actually wished Darren were here to help me. And wasn't that the all-consuming thought before I died?

Deciding I wasn't just going to stand here and die, I gently placed Camaro on the ground and loosely tied her leash to one of the belt loops of my coat. If she took off, the other wolves would definitely chase her and then she'd be done for. I kept the tie loose enough so she could get away if I wasn't able to fight them off. Considering it was six against one, I doubted I'd last very long.

Expanding my arms to make myself look bigger, I leaned forward and snarled back at the wolf, hoping my aggression would hinder theirs, but it just made them jump and snarl more. Camaro barked and whined behind

my legs, and it only made the pack bark back. Adrenaline rushed through my veins, making my body shake with terror as I strategized internally on how to survive this. I came up with shit.

On its last snarl, the alpha wolf finally took off in a run and leaped into the air, teeth and claws headed straight for my face. Instinctively bringing my arm up, the wolf's teeth latched onto my arm, its jaws clamping down with enough pressure to make my scream cause an avalanche. Pain electrocuted through my forearm as its teeth sunk into my skin, even through the thick barriers of my coat, and no matter how many times I bashed my fist into its head and neck, it never let go. It was going to kill me. I was going to die by a pack of fucking wolves. Fuck.

But the piercing sound of a bullet ripping through the air suddenly silenced everything. The weight of the wolf fell over my body, and the sounds of more shots echoed through the trees quickly followed by the sounds of yelps and crunching snow. Immediately shoving the now dead wolf off me, I watched as blood drained from its side, a bullet wound the size of a golf ball burst from its thick black fur. Its belly rose and deflated several times before it stopped, and a final breath of hot air left its snout.

I clutched my bleeding arm to my chest, hearing the sound of footsteps quickly crunching through the snow, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from the dead wolf. My name echoed in the background, but I couldn't focus on where it was coming from or whose voice it was. All I could do was stare at the dead wolf that had taken my place.

"Jaden!" I heard someone call, and it was only a few seconds more before I was hauled to my feet and shaken back to reality. "What the fuck are you doing out here!?"

My breath caught in my lungs as I looked up at Darren's extremely livid face. I couldn't find my words. His hands were gripping my upper arms, keeping me steady, but it didn't stop my body from shaking in absolute terror.

"Where are your bodyguards!?" he shouted, making me wince, and I tried to focus on forming words.

"I... I don't know," I whispered.

"Look at me," he ordered, but his gloved hands wrapped around my face, tilting my head up and gave me little room to argue. "Are you hurt?" His eyes scanned wildly up and down my body, searching for injuries until he finally saw the blood seeping through my coat.

“My arm,” I murmured.

And then two more shots reverberated off the trees, making me jump. Darren remained unfazed, his eyes only focused on my arm.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath as he gently took my arm in his hands. And then he went back to being angry. “Why are you alone? How the fuck did you get out here?” he asked. He was furious. I could feel it coming off his skin and seeping into mine like venom, and I had to fess up to that.

“I s-snuck out,” I mumbled quietly before turning my eyes away, unable to take the heat anymore. Fuck, my arm hurt.

“Goddammit,” he murmured under his breath and pulled me to his chest. My instinct was to hold him tighter, but I could barely move. My eyes looked up toward his shoulder and came into contact with the rifle strung over his back. And that was when I realized Darren was the one who fired the shot. He’d actually saved my life; something I never thought in a million years would ever happen. What the fuck had I done?

“I’m sorry,” I said, my tears now filling my voice as I released my fear through my eyes.

He sighed heavily and then released me.

“I got two more,” I heard another voice say in the distance. It must have been Scott. “Lost the rest when they crossed the river.” That was when I looked over and noticed two more dead wolves laying in the snow.

“We’ll check the area later for more. Right now, I need to get her back. Here, take the dog,” Darren commanded, reaching down for Camaro and handing her to Scott after he’d lifted the dead wolf over his shoulder.

“No,” I replied quietly in protest. I didn’t want to give her up. I was afraid she’d be gone for good.

“Quiet,” Darren ordered sternly, shutting me up without argument. “Put Romero and Alex in my office and find their replacements. I’ll deal with them after I’m done with this one,” he said nodding at me.

I sucked in a breath. I knew I was fucked.

“Come on, we need to take care of your arm. Keep it elevated,” Darren said and began to guide me back to the house. My eyes stayed on Scott who carried Camaro in one arm while the dead wolf laid draped over his shoulder, its bloodied tongue hanging from its mouth.

I didn’t say a word as Darren nearly dragged me back to the house, his fury so evident I shivered because of it. My tears had dried down my face in

frozen rivers, and I had a feeling there would be lots more to come. The pain of what was likely to come was far greater than any wolf bite.

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When we got back to the cabin, Darren took me back to our room, the posts of Romero and Alex replaced with two more new faces, ones I didn't even bother to look at. It would likely just make things worse. Yanking the door open, he nearly threw me inside, and I almost went face first into the carpet if I hadn't caught myself. Slamming the door behind him, he nearly tore off his own coat and dropped it to the floor. I felt the coward in me come alive as he stalked toward me, eyes like ice that pierced my courage.

“Darren, I’m sorry. Please, I’m sor—”

“Not a word,” he said, his voice deadly calm as he began to gently peel off my coat. I shut my mouth and grimaced as the fabric moved against my stinging skin, and when he softly pulled the sleeve of my bloodied sweater up, my stomach instantly twisted in my cut. The dark imprint of a canine’s bite was torn into my skin, dark bruising surrounding the punctures as blood clotted over them.

Darren sighed and pulled me toward the bathroom before lifting me onto the counter and rummaging through the cabinets for a first-aid kit. He pulled out a bunch of antiseptics, coated his hands in a heavy-duty sanitizer, and ripped some kind of wipe from a packet. Darren then placed his back to me and took my arm between his arm and side and locked me in place.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice almost panicked.

“This is going to hurt,” he said, and then the sting of a thousand bees enveloped my arm as he wiped it down.

I gasped loudly, unable to stop myself from attempting to jerk my arm away from Darren’s grip, but he kept it in place. I pressed my forehead into

his shoulder blade as he continued to gently wipe my arm down over and over, cleaning the blood and disinfecting the bite. I didn't cry, but the pain of Darren cleaning me up had me groaning and biting my lip until I thought that was going to start bleeding too.

Darren sighed again. "One of your puncture wounds is going to need stitches."

I groaned.

Rummaging through the kit again, Darren pulled out a second, smaller box containing a needle and thread.

"Wait, you're doing them?" I asked.

"I've stitched myself up many times, Jaden. This is no big deal." Darren then took a small tube, squeezing a dab of clear cream onto his fingertips and gently rubbed it around the entire bite mark. "This will help numb the pain."

As the pain in my arm slowly faded, I watched while Darren threaded the needle and then moved to put my arm back into locking position.

"Wait, I need to see," I complained. I needed to know what he was doing.

"No, you don't. Close your eyes and breathe."

I pressed my forehead into Darren's back again and felt my skin tug slightly until the needle slipped through my flesh. The pain was manageable, but that didn't make it comfortable.

In less than five minutes, Darren was finished, and two small black stitches remained in place. He then rubbed some ointment over the entire bite and wrapped it heavily in gauze. He then grabbed a pill bottle from another cabinet, filled a disposable cup with water from the sink, and handed me the cup. When I took it, he then popped two capsules in his palm.

"Open," he ordered, and I complied. "Swallow."

I sipped back the entire cup of water, effectively swallowing the pills, and set the cup down.

When everything was cleaned up, Darren placed his hands on the counter, leaning against it, his head down and sighed heavily. I could tell he was trying to reign in his rage, and it was making me nervous.

"Tell me how you got out," he said. His voice was too calm for comfort, and the fact that he wasn't even looking at me made the blood rush through my veins again.

My stomach dropped, while my eyes inadvertently wandered over to the still filled bathtub and then up to the window I climbed out of.

“Climbed out the window,” I mumbled.

Darren lifted his head and sighed again.

“Why?”

“I was mad at them. Romero wouldn’t let me go outside after you said I could. So I just... left.”

“You just left?”

He made it sound like I did something impossible. I guess it should have been, but it wouldn’t be the first time I’d done the impossible.

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Maybe thirty minutes?”

Darren released a heavy breath, closed his eyes, and ran his fingers through his hair. I watched as he walked away from the counter, his chest rising and falling and further quaking my nerves until he finally looked at me. For the first time ever, I actually saw fear in his eyes. Fear and pain.

“Jesus, Jaden, I almost lost you today. You would have been killed. Do you realize that? You’re lucky I was there to intervene.”

“Yes, I realize that.”

“Then why the FUCK did you disobey me and go beyond the trees?!” The anger in his voice made me jolt inside, but it didn’t dull my own voice. I felt the shock of my near-death experience begin to lift. How the fuck could I know the trees meant wolves?

“I didn’t mean to! I slipped on some ice, and Camaro got loose. She chased after some animal, and I went after her.”

“And you didn’t think that maybe there was a good reason why I wanted you to stay within proximity of the house?”

“I wasn’t just going to let her run off and get lost!” I shouted at him. “I had no idea there were wolves out there!”

“Neither did I! Which was why I went hunting with Scott earlier to make sure the area was safe!”

“Well maybe you should have disclosed that first! I might have actually listened for once if you had better intentions other than being a controlling asshole!”

“Watch it, little girl,” he growled. “None of this would have happened if you’d gone with your guards like you were supposed to.”

“And I would have if they weren’t total dicks! Romero wouldn’t even let me go outside after *you* said I could and that’s bullshit! I have no one, Darren! The least they could do is be nice to me!”

Darren regarded me for a moment before his gaze suddenly intensified, his arms folding across his chest as he squared his stance.

“And what made Romero rescind on my order?” he asked, the accusation in his tone evident.

I bit my bottom lip and glared at him. “Probably had something to do with the fact that I kicked him in the ribs and knocked him on his ass.”

I could see the amusement flash in his eyes, but it was gone in a second.

“Why?” he asked.

I huffed a heavy breath, blowing a strand of stray hair out of my face before I found the guts to answer. “Apparently, he likes to exercise his smart mouth, too.”

Darren shook his head in disappointment and turned his gaze away.

“You’re supposed to listen to them, Jaden. End of. If you’re having issues with their behavior, you take it up with me, not them.”

“I tried that this morning, and you punished me for it, remember?”

“Romero and Alex had every reason to keep you off the balcony. When it comes to your safety, I will take every precaution and never budge. Get used to it,” he said darkly and left the bathroom. When I heard the bedroom door open and slam shut, I knew he would be gone for a while.

Slowly making my way from the bathroom, I collapsed onto the bed. Whatever pills Darren had given me were making me drowsy, and I was out like a light within a few minutes.

40

RAGE



Slamming the door behind me, I stormed out of the room, leaving Jaden to wallow in her mess. With her injured, if I didn't leave now, I would have hurt her more.

"She doesn't leave this room without my direct orders," I commanded as I walked past Jaden's new guards.

"Yes, sir," they both said in unison.

I needed to clear my head before I handled Romero and Alex; otherwise, if I went in there now, they wouldn't walk out alive. I instantly regretted not bringing Clive and Owen. Aside from the one holiday, they were training with more of Scott's men to advance their combative skills as well as their observational ones. I wanted everyone who guarded my manipulative little spitfire to be sharp and ready for anything. The only reason that security wasn't as tight around her while we were up here was because no one really knew about this place except for my closest inner circle, and I wanted to see if Jaden could handle less security when she was treated to something as nice as this. Obviously not. She sounded like the damn younger sibling who taunted their older sibling to get them in trouble.

And hadn't she accomplished her goal.

I could barely catch my breath when I saw the wolf had her forearm between its teeth. Scott and I were just heading back to the house to get the truck to pick up the two bears we'd shot when I heard Jaden's scream. I'd never lifted my rifle so fast, never more grateful that my finger was already

on the trigger. Jaden would have been dead, mauled to pieces in front of my fucking eyes. Another perfect fucking reason why I was always armed everywhere I went. Always.

I knew Scott would have been able to react the same way because the second my rifle was drawn, so was his. The moment I fired the first shot, the bullet drove straight into the wolf's body, taking it down. As soon as I saw it hit the ground and didn't get back up, I'd never run so fast in my entire life. I needed clarification that Jaden was okay, and I needed her in my arms to confirm that.

She was traumatized at first, barely able to speak, but the bite mark aside, she was otherwise alive. The anger I'd felt compared to nothing else when I realized she was alone, especially since Romero and Alex had allowed her to sneak out from right under their noses. I'd warned them about her, yet she was still able to play her tricks on the people who were supposed to be watching and protecting her. No longer.

Stepping outside for some air, I found Scott leaning against the side of the cabin, smoking a cigarette. As soon as he saw me, he pulled out another one and handed it to me. Lighting it with my own lighter, I took a long drag, inhaling the toxic smoke and exhaling my fury. I was not an avid smoker, but there were days when I felt I could smoke an entire pack with the stress of my life.

"How is she?" Scott asked, his gaze moving off toward the distance of the trees.

"She'll be hurting for a while, but she's fine."

Scott released a small snort. "What is your fascination with her?" His voice proved he was genuinely curious. He found my interest in Jaden entertaining, but I never gave him much reasoning for it.

"She amuses me," I answered, taking another drag.

"Lots of women have amused you in the past."

"This one is different. She's stronger than the others."

Scott nodded. "And is your intention to make her stronger... or weaker?"

I raised an eyebrow at his question. He didn't often question my methods and usually agreed with them, but he was most unfamiliar with this method.

"The only thing I wish to weaken is her quest for rebellion and revenge," I replied, exhaling another puff of smoke.

Scott chuckled. “I have a feeling your patience will be the thing that requires the most strengthening then.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle in turn. “You’re probably right. Jaden is exhausting it as it is.”

Scott smirked, his eyes full of agreement as he nodded. Jaden would come around eventually. Once she realized she would get nowhere with her games or attempts at manipulation, she would give up her fight and succumb to her life.

Finishing the last of my cigarette, I snuffed it out and threw the butt in the nearby ashtray.

“Ready to crack some heads?” Scott asked, flicking his butt into the same ashtray.

“Stop me if I go too far. I don’t need them dying on me so Jaden can think she won.”

Scott nodded and opened the sliding door back into the cabin and followed in after me. Storming into my office, the door slammed against the wall as I immediately went for Romero and Alex’s throats and slammed both of them into the wall behind them.

“What the FUCK happened?” I bellowed.

They were smart enough not to bother fighting me. One snap was all it would take for me to kill them both.

“I-I don’t know, sir,” Romero started. “One minute, s-she was there; the next, she’s g-gone,” he said, his voice panicked and afraid. His hands were up in surrender so I could see them, but it didn’t matter whether either of them surrendered. They were both fucked regardless.

“Do you know how long she was gone before either of you noticed?”

“Uh- no, sir, I don’t.”

“A half fucking hour, you stupid incompetent fucks. Do you know the kind of shit that girl can get into in thirty minutes?!”

“No, sir. We’re sor—” Alex tried to pipe up, but I wasn’t having any of it.

“She was almost eaten by a pack of fucking wolves! Do you realize that! Your job was to watch her, and she managed to get away from the both of you and nearly got herself killed! Her arm was torn to shreds because of you!”

I didn’t wait for another word from either of them before gripping their throats even tighter and tossing their useless asses across the room. They

landed in a heap on the floor across the room but were able to roll up onto their shoulders like they were trained to do. And that was when I commenced in beating the ever-living shit out of them. Two on one made no difference to me. I could easily take four, and I'd honestly wished these ass clowns would try to defend themselves, but they didn't bother. Instead, they'd only hoped I wouldn't beat them to death. It wouldn't be the first time I'd done it.

Scott stood in the corner, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed with a fresh smirk on his face as he watched. He knew this would happen, and he loved the violence just as much as I did.

By the time I was done, my fists were sore and covered in blood while Alex and Romero laid on my office floor, covered in my brutality and barely moving.

“The only reason the two of you are still breathing is because Jaden very clearly wanted you dead, and she was betting on me killing you. I will not be giving her the satisfaction. But neither of you will be going near her again. You’re being transferred out. You should be fucking thankful.”

The two of them mumbled something unintelligible, but I shook my head ignoring it.

“Get someone to clean them up and out of my fucking sight. I want them in New Mexico in twelve hours.”

Scott nodded and spoke into his tech watch that doubled as a communication device. “Eric, get your ass in here,” I heard him say as I walked out the door and down to the gym. I had some serious fury to unleash, and if I found another body, it probably wouldn’t last much longer than Romero and Alex did.

41

REGRET



When I woke up several hours later, it was dark, and the pain in my arm was starting to return. I looked down at my gauze wrapped arm and sighed, defeat washing over me. How could I have been so stupid? How did I get so wrapped up in the idea that I was invincible?

I shuffled under the sheets, turning on my other side, and realized Darren was sitting in one of the leather chairs by the window, watching me.

I felt my stomach drop, and I immediately looked away before eventually burying my face in the pillow. After a few moments, I heard Darren get up and felt his weight on the bed at my side. Gripping my shoulders, he pulled me away from the pillow and forced me to look at him, but my eyes went elsewhere.

“Look at me,” he ordered, his hands holding my face while his thumbs rubbed against my cheeks.

Fighting the rebellion, my eyes found his, and I felt myself sink inward.

“How’s your arm,” he asked.

“Tolerable,” I muttered.

“I had the wolf that bit you tested for disease. He was clean, so you should be fine, but I want you to take some antibiotics twice a day for a few days to prevent infection.”

“Okay.”

Darren exhaled and began twirling a lock of my hair between his fingers.

"I imagine you hoped I would kill Romero and Alex?" he asked me, his eyes focused on the hair he was playing with.

I gulped back my fear and looked away, regretting my honesty. "Yes."

"You should know that though they may be a bloody pile of broken bones, they are still breathing."

I nodded. Darren was catching on to me. Fuck.

Darren then grabbed my face and brought my eyes back to his. "That's three guards I've had to replace because of you and your antics. It ends now," he growled down at me.

My eyes fell as I nodded slightly. I felt too shitty to argue.

"I hope you realize your bite mark is not an escape card from your punishment for sneaking out."

"I know," I said, disappointment escaping my lungs.

My fingers dug into the sheets as I listened to Darren stand and remove his belt, the sound of the metal clicking sending shivers up my spine. I knew what was to come, and I couldn't help but tense up. The only warning I received was when Darren gripped my upper arms and threw me over his lap. He ripped my leggings down my legs and began to pelt my ass with his belt. I tried to count like I was supposed to, but he was hitting me too fast and too hard to concentrate and keep up.

"Why is it every time I give you an inch, you run a damn marathon, huh? Every time!" he bellowed, striking me harder.

Pain flared everywhere, heat claiming my body as my fingers dug into the sheets, my teeth grinding as I fought to keep from screaming.

"I almost had to watch you get eaten by wolves, Jaden. Fucking wolves! After everything I'd just done for you!"

"I'm sorry!" I screamed, but Darren did not relent.

By the time he was done, I was shaking, my face wet with tears and my throat dry from the cries I forced myself to silence.

Tossing the belt to the floor, Darren flipped me onto my back and stood to allow his pants to fall. Holding my hips up so that my ass didn't touch the bed, he entered me with enough force to rock my entire being, but like a gift from God, I was wet as fuck down there.

As I got deeper into this relationship of ours, it became clearer and clearer to me that my turn-on of fear and pain made being fucked by him so much easier. I had a feeling Darren wouldn't care much if I was dry down there. He'd make do, and I'd suffer so much more because of it. It was

better this way. I saw that now. At least I'd get some level of enjoyment in the end.

"God, you are so fucking wet," he groaned as he slowly rocked himself in and out of me. I was barely able to contain the whimpers I wanted to release. "You just love getting your ass beat, don't you?"

He'd jerked harder with that little question, and my answer came in the form of a wail that bordered on a moan and a scream. If beating me meant he'd use his dick on my pussy, then I wanted him to pound the shit out of me. He was so solid inside me, hitting all the right places like he knew exactly where they were, but just when I was about to come, he shoved himself into me deeper, sending me further back into the bed and allowing my ass to graze against the sheets. I couldn't help but gasp from the pain.

"Oh, no, princess," he drawled, slowing his pace and torturing me further. "You won't be coming today. You disobeyed me by sneaking away from your guards. This is your punishment. Come, and I'll make it so much worse."

I nearly screamed in frustration.

Over and over, Darren drilled into me, and it took all my inner strength to ignore the pleasure building up inside me. Instead, I chose to focus on the pain, the burning sting in my back, ass, and the ache in my forearm as Darren pushed me deeper into the bed. The harder I focused, the more agonizing it became.

When he finally finished pumping the last of himself inside me, he held my hips tight against his pelvis so I could feel every drop of him filling me up. Lowering himself to my face, his index finger slipped under my collar and pulled me forward.

"Who do you belong to, Jaden?"

As if I could ever forget.

"You," I answered automatically.

It was as if he couldn't disengage until I spoke the magic password to release him from me. It was infuriating that he needed reassurance as often as he did, and I had no choice but to give him that to pacify his need to brainwash me. Let him think I believed it. It would only serve me better in the long run.

When he was satisfied, he pulled away from me and headed into the bathroom only to return a few minutes later. I'd allowed myself to move

from my position just to curl into myself and hide. My pussy was on fire with need while the fire in my back and ass did nothing to distract me.

Darren then returned to the bed to pick up his belt and lace it back through the loops of his jeans.

“You’re not to leave the bedroom until I say otherwise. There are two new guards outside the door and more patrolling outside. I don’t even want to see you staring out the windows, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Darren,” I whispered, my eyes staring dead ahead.

Once adjusted, he lowered himself to me, taking my face in his hand and bringing my eyes to his. His grip was painful, forcing me to wince at the pressure on my jaw.

“You are never to put yourself in danger like that again, do you hear me? Or I will lock you away for the rest of your life. Got it?”

“Yes, Darren,” I whispered.

“Good girl,” he said and kissed me deeply.

When he was finished, he righted himself and grabbed his coat.

“And if I find out you touched yourself in any way to get a release, you’ll wish you hadn’t. Don’t make that mistake,” he threatened and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Laying in our pool of sex, I felt wretched and ruined. Finding strength, I pushed myself up and took a long oatmeal bath, hoping to soothe the pain in my back and rid myself of Darren’s torture. I made sure to keep my gauze-covered arm out of the water as best I could.

When I was done, I changed into a long sweater and thigh-high socks and curled up on the couch, facing away from the window and toward the blazing fireplace. And that was where I sulked for the rest of the night, ignoring my dinner on the table and dreaming of better times when I wasn’t an idiot and loving my life. I didn’t understand myself.

As I thought about it, I realized that I had actually broken out with the intention of the consequences costing Romero and Alex’s life. I’d wanted them to die, and put that plan into action without even thinking twice. The reality of Darren’s theory about me was quickly becoming true, and it was scaring the shit out of me. I was becoming a bloodthirsty little fiend.

I hadn’t cared when Benito was killed, and now, I cared even less that Romero and Alex were barely breathing. But why should I care? They work for a scumbag piece of shit who sells girls, drugs, and weapons for money.

And if I wanted to take down his empire, that meant everyone he employed, including the people hired to “protect” me.

By the time it was all over, I’d probably have more blood on my hands than Darren did. The more guards I could get him to kill, the better my chances could be at getting his people to turn on him. I couldn’t afford to give a shit about them. Whether they were nice or total assholes, they all had to die. Every last one of them.

Three down. A thousand more to go.



It had been two days before I was finally allowed out of our bedroom. It didn’t take long before I fell into another state of depression, but Darren didn’t care much. He knew once I was allowed out again, I’d bounce back like usual. That didn’t mean my mood didn’t irritate him in the meantime. I spent my time either listening to music and building card houses or playing hacky sack, reading on my tablet, or sulking on the couch.

If I didn’t finish my plate, Darren would barge in and force me to sit on his lap again until the remainder was gone. When I didn’t eat fast enough, I tried to argue that I couldn’t eat when I was upset, but Darren concluded that was my own fault and not his problem. So when I threw it up some fifteen minutes later after he left, I tried to keep it as discreet as possible. Eating was painful. With so many knots churning away inside my stomach, there wasn’t much room for anything else, so I ate as slowly as I could to keep it down. I knew I needed to keep my strength up, but I was once again tired of being strong all the time. It was exhausting.

It helped that I rarely had to see Darren until the late hours of the night, usually when I was trying to fall asleep and failing, and he was just finally coming in for the night. I never knew what he was doing or if he was even still in the cabin during the day, but it wasn’t my place to question him. I’d learned that much. Even though he was still pissed, he didn’t hesitate to drag me over to his side of the bed so he could fuck me before wrapping himself around me until we fell asleep. With his sour mood, I felt like I had completely ruined everything. He had put this whole thing together for me and I fucking ruined it by almost getting myself killed by a pack of wolves.

I tried my best to be as passive as possible, but I wasn't exactly forthcoming with excitement either. I was a bored house cat waiting to be let out of the house so I could hunt some shit.

On the second day, shortly after my lunch, Camaro had been released suddenly into the bedroom. I'd asked Darren what had been done with her, but all he said was that I needed some alone time to get my priorities straight. I'd been laying on the couch, listening to music when she ran up and started licking my face. I almost felt a little better then, but it only meant she was trapped here with me. We played games that I barely enjoyed as I tried to keep her entertained, doing my best to potty-train her to use the puppy pads until I could take her outside again.

Having a puppy was actually a lot more exhausting than I thought it was going to be. Camaro kept me busy most of the time with her attention neediness, and when she did finally hunker down to sleep on my lap or at my legs, I couldn't help but follow suit.

Darren was still checking my bite wound, redressing it every day with fresh gauze and making sure I took my antibiotics. I wasn't allowed pain meds anymore, though—another part of my punishment. It seemed to be healing, and the stitches were holding up fine, but I had a feeling the bite was going to scar, and Darren was not happy about that.

When the third day came, I was allowed to go to the gym in the basement to work out. Accompanied by my guards, whose names I didn't bother to learn this time, I was escorted to the gym that contained not a single occupant. It was all to myself. After plugging my headphones in, I practiced some yoga rather than beat the shit out of a punching bag like I usually would. My arm was still too sore to handle the pressure of my punches, so I decided to work my legs and core instead. I still felt lethargic with depression, but I hoped stretching my limbs would help. It didn't.

On the fourth day, I was finally allowed to wander the house and again and spent some time in the sunroom with Camaro. I tried to teach her some tricks with the limited amount of treats I had, and eventually, she was able to sit on command. Getting her to roll over was another story.

It was annoying that I only had so much daylight before the sun went down and shadowed the mountains in the night. At least the sky was something to behold with the millions of stars out on display every night.

Even though Christmas was officially over, I still had Christmas music playing in the background. But something really funny happened to Camaro

when “O Holy Night” by Jackie Evancho came on. Camaro started to sing. She immediately stopped chewing on the rope toy in her mouth, and her ears and nose perked up. And then a little howl, mimicking the song, escaped. It was the cutest fucking thing I’d ever seen. She howled for a good minute, and I quickly grabbed my tablet to try to record it, but that function had been locked somehow.

On the fifth day, I was permitted to take Camaro outside, but only for a half hour and only after all of my lunch was gone. She played in the snow and explored the grounds before we were ultimately shunned back inside. I was actually kind of okay with it. My eyes couldn’t stop scanning the trees for more wolves, terrified I’d find those dark yellow eyes staring back at me. It made it really hard to enjoy the fresh air, but at least, Camaro was enjoying herself.

After growing tired of my hacky sack and card building, I focused on some advanced yoga, balancing on my one good hand while my legs hovered in the air above me. For some reason, this enticed Camaro to want to play, so I tried to incorporate her into the workout. I tried balancing her on my folded legs as I lifted myself up with both hands, and she managed to stay still on my back while I planked on the floor. When I turned over, she was smart enough to follow the route of my body, so she was sitting on my rib cage while I bridged with her on top of me. She was a good thirty-five pounds, so she made quite a difference in my workout. My arm ached the entire time, but for some reason, I welcomed the pain this time. I wanted to push through the pain just so I could prove to myself that I could handle it.

After dinner, I retreated to the couch, staring at the fire and alternating between playing games on my tablet and reading up on the pack traits of wolves from a book I downloaded. Camaro was asleep at my feet, curled up and keeping my toes warm while she snoozed. It wasn’t much later that I found myself unable to hold my eyes open.



I woke to the feeling of soft kisses trailing down on the side of my face. I groaned at the touch, wanting to curl away into myself to avoid waking up, but it seemed someone else had a different plan.

“This is the fourth night in a row I’ve come home to find you sleeping on the couch. Why aren’t you sleeping in our bed?”

Darren’s voice was soft, yet the tone was still stern as ever. I kept my eyes closed, too tired to open them, but made an attempt to answer him. He knew I was awake enough.

“Because I’m mad at you,” I mumbled. I heard a ghost of a laugh escape him.

“When aren’t you mad at me?”

“I’m usually less mad when I’m not confined to one single room for three days.”

“Is someone not enjoying their punishment?”

“I was almost eaten by a pack of wolves and have the scars to prove it. Isn’t that experience punishment enough?”

“Not even close,” he said darkly.

I released a sigh through my nose as I curled into myself more.

“I’m sorry I ruined everything. Again.”

Darren exhaled heavily before picking me up in his arms and carrying me over to the bed. I didn’t fight him. I just wanted to go back to sleep.

He tucked me in under the sheets, took off his own clothes, and slipped in behind me, pulling me close and resting my head on his shoulder. He was so warm and solid; I couldn’t stop myself from curling into his side. His lips brushed against my forehead as I settled, his big hand rubbing along my bare arm and lulling me back to sleep.

“No more sleeping on the couch,” I heard him say.

“Mmmhmm,” I mumbled before slipping back into unconsciousness.

In the morning, I woke up alone and went through my usual morning routine of breakfast and bullshit. I got to take Camaro out again for her walk while it lightly snowed outside. Doing my best to forget my fear of wild animals, I looked around to appreciate the view of the mountains surrounding us. It was beyond beautiful, and I wondered what everything looked like in the spring or summer, or even the fall. I wondered how often we could come back here, but what use was that if I was confined to one room all the time and didn't even get to explore the town. I doubted Darren would take me out now. I was such a fuck-up.

After lunch, I put my hair up in a clip and gave Camaro her first bath since she had decided to dig through the snow and got herself covered in muddy snow. Worse. Idea. Ever. I had never given a dog a bath, and I had no clue that it would involve me basically taking a bath with her. I was glad I was at least smart enough to cover my arm with plastic wrap to keep the soapy puppy water from touching it. At first, she was afraid of the water, but once she got used to it, she wouldn't stop splashing around and playing in it. She wouldn't sit still while I scrubbed her fur clean with the puppy soap, and she made the biggest fucking mess every time she shook the water from her fur.

Once I felt she was clean enough, I turned off the mobile showerhead, and Camaro shook more water from her fur. I tried to block it with a towel, but she still managed to get more of it on the tiled walls behind the tub. Picking her up with the towel, I knelt on the floor and rubbed the towel up and down her little body while she fussed and whined. I let her go for a

moment so I could plug in my hair dryer to finish the drying process, but by the time I turned back around, she was already chewing on the door to the walk-in shower.

“Goddammit, Camaro, stop that!” I yelled at her, bending down to pick her up.

That was when I felt a swift hard smack on my ass. Jolting upward and turning with the fist of my good arm ready to connect in the air, it was met with the tight grip of a very large, warm hand. My heart beating out of my chest from surprise and my ass pulsing with heat, I turned to find Darren standing behind me, holding my wrist in place with a very stern look on his face. I felt myself blanch. I hadn’t even heard him come in.

“What are my rules, Jaden?” he asked calmly, but his face was anything but.

I bit my tongue so hard then.

“No cussing,” I answered on a quiet breath.

Darren took a few steps toward me, his tight grip still on my wrist, and I couldn’t stop myself from retreating from his advance.

“Just because I’m not around does not mean this rule doesn’t apply.”

I felt myself begin to shake inside, fear coursing up my spine as I tried to find my voice to plead for his forgiveness.

“I know. I’m sorry. It slipped,” I said cautiously.

He took another step closer, his dark blue eyes glowering down at me and making me feel small. I could feel my core contract with need as heat and fear filled it up.

“And what do you think I need to do to ensure you no longer ‘slip’?” he asked darkly.

I gulped. I did not want to recommend a punishment for myself. That was way too fucking embarrassing.

“I... I don’t know.”

He sighed, and it almost sounded like disappointment.

“If you can’t seem to control that smart mouth of yours, maybe I should elect not to take you into the city today.”

I looked up at him both confused and surprised.

“You were going to take me into the city today?”

Darren’s expression softened, looking as though he really did want to take me somewhere.

“That depends,” he said. “Do you think you deserve it?”

I sighed in defeat. If that was the question, then the answer was probably no.

I was quiet for a moment before I finally answered him in a small voice.

“Have I not suffered enough for you?” I whispered, my eyes not even brave enough to look him in the face.

Darren stepped in so close; my nose almost touched his chest. I could feel his body heat soaking into me, warming me all over while his scent put my senses into hyper drive. The tip of Darren’s finger slipped under my chin and lifted my gaze to him. He spoke softly.

“It has never been about how much you suffer for me, princess. It’s always been about how much you please me. You seem to have forgotten that.”

My gaze fell away from him for a moment as I recalled his words. I was supposed to please him... like the good little slave I was.

“You’re right,” I admitted quietly. “I have forgotten. I’m sorry.”

Second apology, Jaden. Knock that shit off.

Darren released a satisfied breath. “Well, I’m glad that’s settled because it would please me very much to take you into town so you can see Anchorage for yourself.”

My eyes instantly found his in shock. “Really?”

Darren’s hands lifted to my face and held me still.

“Really. And it would please me even more to see this beautiful face of yours smile for once.”

I wanted to cry suddenly. Why the fuck did I want to cry?

“Okay,” I said with a nod.

“Can you be ready in thirty minutes?”

I turned my head to look at myself in the mirror and nearly cringed. I looked like a wreck.

“I think I can manage that,” I said, my eyes assessing the stringy wet ends of my hair that were clinging to my jaw and neck.

“Good,” Darren said with a smile and kissed my forehead. “I’ll see you shortly.”

He then left me alone with a still damp puppy and a slightly damp pussy.

Damn him.

After taking ten minutes to get Camaro’s ass dry with the hair dryer, I unclipped my stringy damp hair and braided it into a loose braid down one

side of my neck. After applying some light makeup, I rushed into the closet, ignoring Camaro as she playfully nipped at my ankles. Changing out of my wet black leggings, I switched for another similar pair and a long dark burgundy sweater dress and black knee-high boots. Grabbing my black wool pea coat, leather gloves, and begrudgingly, the stupid purple poofy hat, I laid everything on the bed and placed Camaro in her crate. She whined and barked while I slipped into my coat, but she would have to endure in her cage just like I would. A few short minutes later, another knock came on the door, and one of the guards who stood outside the door addressed me.

“Are you ready, Miss Jaden?” he asked, his voice hopeful. I could tell he didn’t want to tell Darren I would be holding him up.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I replied, yet I didn’t feel ready. I felt nervous, excited, and apprehensive.

Following him out the door, the second guard trailed behind me, and I felt my heart flutter as we made our way down the stairs. I hadn’t been out in public in nearly six months, and I’d have to pretend that everything was okay. I’d have to ignore opportunities for escape and do my absolute best to keep to myself. Fuck, this was going to be hard.

When we got down to the foyer, I found Darren deep in conversation with Scott. Upon my arrival, their conversation abruptly ended as Darren looked me over. He nodded slightly to Scott and my guards, and they all filed out through the front doors. The moment they were gone, Darren’s eyes practically swallowed me whole. He seemed angry, brooding in a way that had me wanting to take a step back.

He walked toward me slowly with purposeful intimidation. With his long black pea coat, black turtleneck, and black leather gloves, he looked like a damn hitman moving in for the kill.

“I don’t want to ruin this by disrupting your optimism, but I hope I don’t have to discuss with you the consequences of disappointing me while we’re in public,” he said, his face stern, but there was a hint of regret in his eyes. He seemed like he really did want me to enjoy this.

“No, there’s no need,” I said, shaking my head for emphasis. I knew exactly what would happen if I fucked up. No explanation necessary.

He sighed, seemingly satisfied with my answer, and relaxed. “Good girl,” he said with a small smile and kissed me on the forehead. “Then, let’s go.”

He placed his hand on the small of my back and led me out the door to the two black idling Range Rovers. One of the guards opened the door to the last SUV, allowing Darren to usher me in while he slid in after me.

The drive to Anchorage had me more excited than I wanted to admit. I had mentally discussed with myself that there would be no thoughts of escape or pushing Darren's leniency. I would use this as an exercise to gain his trust. If I could get through this sans fuck-ups, then maybe he would let me out more often. And then I could really make my move without being suspected of it.

I silently bounced my knee while wringing my gloved hands in my lap, my mouth quickly becoming dry as I stared out the window, anxious as fuck. A few moments later, I felt Darren's hand press down on my knee, promptly stopping it from bouncing.

"Relax, Jaden. Everything will be fine," he said, a slight laugh leaving his lips.

Suddenly, I felt myself wishing to be back inside my room, hidden away from the potential disaster this event could turn out to be.

Breathe, Jaden. You've got this. You're not ceramic. You're fucking steel.

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43

OUT

By the time we got to the town, I felt calm enough as we parked on what seemed like the main street of the city and got out.

Taking my hand in his, Darren had a slight smile on his face as we began to walk the street.

“What are we doing?” I asked, suddenly wanting to know everything so nothing would surprise me.

“I thought you might like to walk the town and see it for yourself,” he said genuinely.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

For the next hour, Darren and I walked the streets of downtown Anchorage, drinking in the atmosphere of their beautiful winter wonderland. The city’s Christmas decorations still lingered over the streetlights and businesses, Christmas lights strung everywhere with a giant lit up and highly decorated Christmas tree in the center of the city. Seeing the mountains in the background of the city had me wanting to do all kinds of wilderness exploring, even with my latest near-death experience. I was confident that should a threat arise, it wouldn’t last long around Darren. I hated how comforting I found that. I didn’t want to rely on Darren for anything, least of all my safety.

With all the surrounding mountains, it made me curious of their ski lifts. I was sure those mountains had some excellent powder to snowboard down, but with my recent injuries that probably wasn’t possible right now. I might be fully recovered, but it had been a while since I snowboarded, and I didn’t want to jeopardize anything just yet.

As we walked, I tried hard not to stare at the people, looking at just the buildings and scenery. When I was able to lose myself in it, the entire scene was simply breathtaking. The mountains surrounding us were everything I thought they would be and more. But then I'd feel a slight tug on my arm and remember where I really was. Darren held my hand the entire time, never letting up on his tight grip, but I did notice the slight decrease in speed of his typical walking pace. I normally walked the same pace he did, but I appreciated his slowing down to allow me to enjoy the city. With the number of times I wasn't looking ahead of me, it would have been very easy for me to trip over myself and stumble into something.

I could feel my personal guards, as well as Scott and the other remaining guards behind us. They traveled at a respectful distance, not wanting to appear obvious as a security entourage. I appreciated their discretion and the fact that Darren was allowing it. It was almost as if it was just the two of us out for a stroll, or hell, even a date.

As the sun went down shortly after four p.m., a light snowfall had begun to fall over the city, adding to the magic that made Anchorage a special gem to cherish. And for some reason, it only made me sad. The entire time, I fought to ignore the fact I was finally out in the open. I was being seen by people who had no idea I was a walking ghost, that I was once a missing girl who was later found dead in the back of an alley in downtown Detroit. No one here knew that. No one recognized me or barely even looked at me for that matter. And to be honest, I was glad. I didn't want a scene. I didn't want anything to happen that would affect the safety of my family. I despised that Darren was still able to hold them over my head, but at least, he was no longer hunting every single one of them. Just the ones who had actually foiled his plans and escaped him.

“So what do you think?” Darren asked me as we walked along the outside path of Delaney Park.

“It's beautiful. Thank you for letting me see it.”

“You're welcome,” he said, but there was a hint of smugness hidden in his tone. “Come on; let's step in here for a minute.”

Darren pulled us into what seemed like a small pet store, the door ringing as we stepped inside to signal our entrance. He leisurely led me over to the section of the store containing all the collars and told me to pick one. But as I looked over all the collars, my fingers couldn't help but casually tap against the one around my throat. Why was he making me do

this? Why hadn't he just picked one out himself as he had for everything else that might be considered mine? Why did giving me the choice of selecting the collar matter so much to him? It felt like a cruel slap in the face.

Gazing over the large selection, I had a hard time figuring out what to pick out for my dog. There were collars of all different sizes and colors, some with spikes and some with bows. Eventually, I finally decided on a sparkly silver one with little rhinestones around the center.

"Really? That's the one you want?" Darren asked, his eyebrows raised in obvious surprise.

"The irony is not lost on me, Darren. It only makes sense that Camaro's collar should match my own," I said boldly.

Darren stepped closer to me, his anger becoming evident. Luckily, we were the only two in the store and we were well hidden by the numerous shelves around us.

"Are you trying to push me right now?" he asked, his voice low but still just as menacing.

"Not even a little bit. But you are certainly trying to push me with this, and it's not fair."

Darren stepped even closer, his hand wrapping around my arm in a tight warning grip and lowered his lips to my ear. "When are you going to get over the idea that I'll ever be fair to you? You'll live your life as I see fit, and I'm beyond the point of caring how unfair you think that is. Now, stop complaining and pick out a damn tag for Camaro."

I huffed my sigh as he returned to his full height, and I focused on not rolling my eyes as I searched through the tags next to the collars. Not giving a damn anymore, I picked the typical metal bone-shaped tag and handed it, along with the collar, to Darren. He took my selections to the front counter and had Camaro's name engraved onto the metal. I kept my mouth shut, and my eyes unfocused as Darren answered the clerk's questions and paid for everything.

When we left the store, he handed the bag to one of the guards who waited outside, and we carried on our way, my hand still stuck in Darren's. We walked back to the SUV and took off again, and even though I wanted to ask where we were going now, I stayed quiet. My answer eventually came when we pulled in front of a nice restaurant with a beautiful view of Knik Arm and the mountains beyond it.

Darren ushered me out of the SUV and led me inside where we were seated at a private table in the back that allowed for the best view. The guards and Scott stood off to the side, almost surrounding our table and naturally making me uncomfortable. It felt like they were garnering unnecessary attention that I didn't want.

My heart was racing, and I couldn't stop myself from glancing from table to table as people stared at us. My knee started to bounce against under the table.

"What's wrong now?" Darren asked, his voice hinting at his annoyance.

"Everyone is staring," I murmured under my breath.

"And you're concerned by this because?"

"I'm just... not used to that."

Darren shifted in his seat, leaning forward to place his forearms on the table. "You'll get used to it." His voice was clipped and stern, and it was making me uneasy.

A few short moments later, a group of waiters showed up and placed two plates down in front of Darren and me. They also poured us each a glass of white wine and placed the bottle in the ice bucket before leaving us alone.

I stared down at the grilled salmon, green beans, and redskins, confused as to when I had ordered anything and looked at Darren for an answer.

"I had everything ordered before we got here," he answered, noticing my confusion.

"Oh," I replied, ignoring the fact that even when we went out, I still didn't get to choose what I ate.

Thankfully, dinner was delicious anyway. It felt so strange being seen again, being so exposed. There was so much hustle and bustle going on around me. Between the people dining and socializing behind us, and the scenery above, it was more stimulus than I was used to, and for some reason, it made me nervous. It felt like every single eye was on me; whether they were Darren's or his guards or the people around us, it didn't matter. It was nerve wracking, and it made it difficult for me to eat. Again.

Halfway through my dinner, I felt sick, like I couldn't hold another bite down. And the idea of asking to use the public restroom absolutely tormented me.

"You don't look well," Darren commented from across the table.

"I don't feel well," I confirmed. "Can I use the restroom?"

Darren glared at me for a moment, sighing through his nose before finally nodding. The warning in his eyes left me nearly shaking as I stood from the table. Hesitantly turning away, my guards followed me to the restroom, standing just outside the door as I locked myself in a stall. Thankfully, the restroom was empty, giving me the opportunity to let go.

Bending down to the floor, I threw up everything I'd just ate, my body shaking from the chills that came over me. When I was done, and my stomach was empty, I flushed the toilet and sat on the lid to regain my composure. It wasn't long before I felt myself begin to hyperventilate, and I had no fucking clue what the hell was wrong with me. Why was I reacting like this? I was finally out in the open, free of the confines of Darren's property, but that didn't mean I was any less a prisoner. If anything, I was more restricted out here than I was at his home.

If I fucked up behind the closed doors of Darren's estate, the punishment wouldn't be nearly as bad if I had fucked up out in public. If I involved other people, they would suffer because of me, and I didn't want to jeopardize them. There were so many opportunities to escape, so many options for me to run or call for help, but none of them would matter. The result would still be the same. I'd end up back with Darren and in deeper shit than I wanted to think about. I didn't want to be out here. I wanted to be back in the shadows where I felt safe from my own potential self-inflicted disaster.

After a few moments of silent calm, I heard the bathroom door open, followed by the sound of laughter and chatter from two women. I quickly did my business and moved to the sinks to covertly wash my hands and rinse my mouth out with the complimentary mouthwash on the counter. Looking myself in the mirror, I noticed how pale I looked. Fuck, I was not good.

Reaching under the water, I began to rinse my hands of the soap, when another two women walked in. The small bathroom was becoming crowded, and I hurried to get back to Darren.

"Oh, my God. I love your bracelets! Where did you get them?" a high-pitched shriek of a voice came from next to me. A young woman practically beamed over my cuffs, and I quickly retracted them from the water to prevent her from noticing the tags of ownership that were inked into my skin.

"They were a gift," I said quietly, my voice shaking. She was the first person I had spoken to in six months who wasn't under Darren's payroll.

"Well, you are a lucky girl," the young woman said very matter-of-factly. "I wish my husband would treat me to gifts like those."

If only she knew...

I ignored her and snatched a breath mint from the basket in the counter of the sink, hurrying out of the bathroom before she could observe my odd behavior further. Popping the mint into my mouth, I found myself nearly racing back to the table to prove to Darren that I hadn't broken any of his rules. My guards actually seemed to be having difficulty keeping up with me, but I couldn't discredit them fully. I was able to weave in and around people like no one's business.

When I finally made it back to the table, my heart was racing, and my breathing uneven. My eyes went straight to the table, fearful to look up at Darren. I could already feel him brooding from across the table. I sucked on my mint and kept my hands in my lap as I fought to keep my nerves down. This was so fucking stupid. I didn't understand why I was reacting like such a little bitch, but I was so fearful of fucking up out here that I no longer felt safe. It felt like a trap, like a deliberate dark trap meant to torment me with an idea that no longer existed for me. At least not yet.

"You threw up, didn't you," Darren finally spoke. It wasn't a question.

I nodded, my eyes locked on the table, my body rigid with fear. I knew he didn't like it when I threw up my food, but when it came to my nerves, my stomach held no ground. Darren cursed under his breath.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Almost instantly, my eyes shot to his, the dark blue surrounding me and reminding me why I should be afraid in the first place.

"Do you want some air?" he asked simply.

"Yes," I said on a whisper, trying hard not to sound like I was pleading with him.

"Come with me," he ordered, standing up and holding out my coat for me to slip on. I placed my arms into the coat and allowed Darren to drape it over my shoulders before buttoning it up. My hat and gloves were next while Darren buttoned his coat. He then took my hand and directed me to the doors that led to the restaurant's wrap-around balcony. Pulling me through the doors, he motioned for the guards to stay behind inside and led me over to the railing.

Caging me in with his arms, Darren pulled me to him in a tight embrace.

“Slow, deep breaths,” he said, his voice soft and surprisingly soothing.

I did as he said, taking long, deep inhales and exhaling through my nose, filling my lungs with the crisp cold air of the mountain. After about a minute, I felt much calmer.

“Better?” he asked when I was noticeably calm.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good. Now, what was going on back there?”

I had to release another breath before gaining the courage to answer.

“I just... started to panic. I’m not sure why.”

“Jaden, you were scared. What were you afraid of?”

I looked up to his face to find his features sincere, washed with concern. It gave me the strength I needed to answer.

“I’m scared of screwing up. I’m sorry. I just don’t feel comfortable out here. Maybe I just wasn’t ready for this yet.”

Darren sighed, his eyes glancing up before returning them to me. “Turn around,” he said and nudged me with his shoulders.

I went with his motion, pressing my back into his chest while his hands rested on the railing to cage me within his body. For once, I took comfort in that. I felt shielded... protected. And it was odd that I found myself embracing that comfort. In the warmth of his embrace, I could see skiers and snowboarders off in the distance, sliding down the snow and kicking up clouds of white powder in their wake. I became instantly envious that I wasn’t down there with them. I wanted to fly like they were.

“Do you snowboard?” I asked Darren.

“Occasionally,” he replied.

“Are you any good?”

He released a soft chuckle. “There isn’t much I’m not good at.”

I covertly rolled my eyes. Of course, he was good at nearly everything.

“I miss it,” I added.

Darren was silent for a moment before he answered. “Maybe next year we’ll hit the slopes.”

“Really?”

“Sure, when I’m confident in your durability.”

I shook my head and sighed. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Treating me like a flower.”

I felt Darren lower his lips to my ear. “How should I treat you then?”

I gulped back my response but answered anyway. “How about as your equal and not your prisoner?”

“You have yet to earn that status.”

“I am trying...”

“Are you sure? You seem very content with challenging your guards to the point of attempting to manipulate me into killing them.”

I scoffed. “I’m curious. What would you have me do when the men charged with watching over me taunt me?”

“Taunt you how?”

“Romero and Alex enjoyed pushing me in ways that encouraged my natural rebellious behavior.”

“Then you will come to me, and I will handle it.”

“And if they don’t let me? If you’re gone?”

“Then you will deal with it until I return. They will not keep you from me.”

“You know how well that will go down,” I said, shaking my head. “Dealing” wasn’t exactly my specialty.

“And how do you think it will go down when I get home and find out you took matters into your own hands?”

“I imagine you would thank me for handling my own shit, so you don’t have to.”

“Don’t be a smartass. These men are here to protect you, which they clearly failed to do when they allowed you to sneak away from them. If you don’t allow them to do their job, you jeopardize yourself. Have you not learned that yet?”

“I can take care of my damn self. I don’t need them.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be here with me now. This isn’t up for debate. When we get back to the estate tomorrow, Clive and Owen will resume their positions, and you will do as you’re told. I imagine Camaro will provide an easy distraction from your life as my *prisoner*.”

My jaw clenched at his comment, the acid of his tone burning my skin. I wanted to continue arguing, but it was exhausting with him when I was always on the losing end.

Exhaling the last of my argument, the sound of cracking boomed aloud followed by the bright spray of exploding color in the sky. Fireworks

blasted off in the distance, shooting all sorts of colors and designs into the air. It was only eight p.m., so I wasn't sure why they were going off, but I didn't care. I allowed myself to get lost in the moment, taking comfort in Darren's warmth behind me as I watched the sky. With the mountains in the background, and the white snow glistening over the top, it was the most beautiful display I had ever seen.

When it was over some half hour later, and my eyes were still mesmerized by magic, Darren tilted my head back and planted a firm kiss on my lips. It made me melt as I kissed him back, not because he wanted me to, but because I wanted to. I decided I would take advantage of him when I could. I didn't have to enjoy the words that came out of his mouth, but I could certainly appreciate the skill of the tongue that created them.

"Come on," Darren said, breaking the kiss. "I have another surprise for you."

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44

LIGHTS



It took about a twenty-minute drive to get to the drop-off site just outside of Eagle River. I knew of a clear trail that would take us to a primal spot for optimal viewing. The sky was perfect, and the weather wasn't even as chilly as I had predicted. Jaden was going to fucking love this.

Stepping out of the car, Jaden followed me around to the trunk of the Range Rover. When I opened it, her eyes lit up in total confusion.

"What's all that for?" she asked, gesturing at the contents of the trunk.

That was when the truck that had been following a mile behind us pulled up with the trailer carrying the Arctic Cat XF 9000.

"It's for that," I said, nodding over at the truck as it pulled up. I thought her eyes were going to bulge out of her head.

I switched out my coat for the heavy-duty parka in the trunk, my eyes never leaving Jaden as she watched my men unload the snowmobile and fire it up. Her excitement was palpable, and I was hoping for that exact reaction from her.

"Come on, you need to get changed," I urged her as I slipped into a pair of black snow pants. She couldn't contain her smile as she eagerly grabbed the hot pink snow pants and slipped them on without a single grudge in the world. She might complain about how bright the color was, but what she didn't know was that color was meant to help me keep an easier eye on her. It was much harder to disappear when you looked like a walking highlighter.

When we were both fully dressed, I led her smirking ass over to the idling snow machine.

After her little inspection of the Arctic Cat, her eyes found mine, and a challenging smile formed on her lips.

“So where’s yours?” she asked, that confident and cocky attitude of hers that made my cock hard rising up again. Her arms crossed over her chest as she jutted her hip out, waiting for my reply.

I returned her smile in earnest and tossed her the helmet sitting on the seat, which she caught easily.

“Yeah, right,” I said, lifting my leg over the seat and sitting down. Like I’d let her have enough control with her own snowmobile. I don’t think so. “Come on,” I prompted, patting the seat behind me for her to take. I turned around and put my own helmet on as I felt Jaden’s weight settle behind me.

“Ready?” I called behind me.

“Yeah!” she shouted over the noise of the engine and gripped my sides. The feel of her clinging to my body for leverage brought a smile to my face. I wanted more of it, and I never wanted her to stop.

Shifting the snowmobile into gear, we took off down a path that had been used several times by Scott, not only to prepare this ride so that it was safer for Jaden, but to travel back and forth from hunts when I couldn’t. The machine cut through the snow without an issue, giving Jaden a nice little ride as I took us over hills, between trees, and driving further up the mountain for the best view.

A full moon was out in full force tonight, coating everything in white light and giving the snow an eerie pale glow. We passed a herd of elk and the occasional deer, all of which Jaden pointed out like a little kid at the zoo. It was adorable. She might not have been able to enjoy herself much in the presence of the public eye, but out here, where she was alone with me, she could breathe a little easier. Her excitement behind me was beyond evident, and I was satisfied in knowing I was the cause of that excitement. For a small moment, she was happy.

After about an hour of fun, I pulled us over to the side of the mountain that would grant us the best view and cut the engine. I lifted my helmet, Jaden following suit, and set them on either handlebar while stepping off the snowmobile.

“How was that?” I asked her.

She gave me that look she gives when she doesn't want to admit the obvious, but eventually, she conceded.

"Okay, that was a lot of fun," she said. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"You should let me drive on the way back," she added.

"I don't think so. You'd probably lead us right off the side of the mountain."

She glared back at me, the cuteness of her anger not lost on me.

"Don't tempt me," she threatened, her eyes narrowed as she moved off the snowmobile, the playfulness in her voice was not lost on me.

"Come here," I said with a low chuckle, holding my arm out for her to huddle to my side, the weight of her warm embrace enough to satisfy me. When she settled, she looked down the mountain to gaze upon the best view of Alaska. Her eyes widened as she took in the scene while I took in the simple beauty of her.

"Wow," she beamed. "This is... amazing."

"Agreed," I murmured, my eyes still lingering over her.

After a moment, a stick cracked in the distance of the trees, causing Jaden's head to whip to the source of the sound, her breath hitching in a gasp. I didn't fight the smirk that followed.

"Don't worry, princess," I said, sitting down on the snowmobile and pulling Jaden onto my lap. "No wolves out here. I made sure of it."

She scoffed but nodded. I watched as her facial expression softened into something uncertain as she seemed to withdraw into herself. I squeezed her hand, hoping to encourage her to give voice to her thoughts, but she looked away back toward the world below. My eyes followed suit.

She sat there with me for a few moments, just admiring the scene around us until she finally said something I thought I would never hear.

"I never thanked you," she muttered quietly, her eyes lost in thought. I knew where she was going, but I never got what I truly wanted unless I pushed her for more.

"For what?"

Jaden released a deep breath before answering, as if thanking me was the most painful thing for her to do.

"For killing the wolves."

"You mean for saving your life," I corrected, anger rising in my voice at the thought of even having to save her from a situation she had caused in

the first place. The thought of her in danger had my blood boiling in seconds.

Jaden's warm amber eyes met mine, fire licking through her irises as she glared at me. She didn't want to admit that I had rescued her from a fatality she could not have escaped from by herself. My warrior princess didn't want me to be her hero; it would contradict her image of me being the villain, and wasn't that something to smile about?

Jaden wanted to be her own hero, her own knight in shining armor, but I was diminishing her independence by forcing her to rely on others for her safety. I had no doubt that if Jaden had been armed, she could have handled the wolf pack herself, but it was too soon to trust her with anything even closely deemed as a potential weapon. She might be smart enough to refrain from killing me, but I made no threats for killing others, and someday, it just might come down to that, but until then, she needed to learn to respect the people I put in place to protect her.

"Sure, let's call it that," she mumbled.

Jaden's lips formed a tight line before she finally looked away back toward the sky, but I wasn't done scolding her for her blatant disregard for her own safety.

"You're welcome," I said harshly, still waiting for the actual thank you that would burn her tongue.

"Thank you," she whispered, her eyes still on the sky while the words disappeared into the cold air like ghosts.

"Do you have any idea how terrified I was when I saw that wolf attack you?"

She didn't even look at me when she responded. "I imagine it compares little to the amount of terror I feel on a daily basis."

"Look at me," I ordered, taking her face in my hand and prying her eyes back to me. "The terror you feel is in place for a reason. If there is no fear of me or the consequences of your actions, you will never adapt to your place. It is your own fault that I have to be so strict with you all the time."

A ghost of a smirk appeared on her lips as I released her face to allow her to speak. "You call threatening and killing my family strict? What about everyone else you've killed because of me?"

"Necessary. If that is what I have to do to keep you in line and ensure that you are safe, I will do it without conscience."

She stared at me for a long time, her chest heaving heavy breaths, while her jaw clenched and her brows furrowed in confusion. After a moment, she seemed to relax.

“Why me?” she asked softly.

I sighed, knowing this question was coming. It was a valid question. Why her? Why was she the focus of my obsession? Why was I so hell-bent on making her mine? I had rationalized it in my head so often that all the explanations simply blurred together.

“Because no matter how many times I try to snuff the defiance out of you, you refuse to fade. You give me what no one else ever has or could, and I’m drawn to it like a moth to a flame.”

“And what happens when that flame finally dies? How will you get your fix then?”

I smiled. “I’m a very good fire starter, Jaden. I know just how to ignite the sparks in you when you need it. It’s not in your nature to break.”

She released a light breath through her nose, seemingly preparing to respond, but then the sky began to light up with bright neon color. The anticipated display of the northern lights began to dance across the night sky in vertical waves of pink, blue, and green, further adding to the beautiful scenery below. The alarm on my watch then began to beep, signaling the end of one year and the beginning of another. A year I intended to share with Jaden and many more to come for the rest of my life.

“Oh, my God,” Jaden whispered as her eyes washed over the sky. She had tears in the corners of her eyes, her face so mesmerized by what she was seeing. It tugged at the thinning strings of my heart.

The aurora borealis continued to move along the sky for several minutes, the colors fading and winding around each other, painting the sky with a light show not even the fireworks could touch. I’d planned this days ago, and it turned out to be the perfect timing. I knew Jaden would love this, and judging by the fact that she couldn’t take her eyes away from the sky, I’d won.

“You planned this?” she asked as she turned to me, her voice clearly shocked.

“Mmhmm,” I moaned.

I rubbed my nose along the side of Jaden’s face before turning her head and kissing her with a softness I wanted to last forever. She moaned into my mouth, responding to the kiss like she wanted to, no longer denying herself

the pleasure of my touch. The northern lights continued to weave and wave above us, but we didn't need them anymore. We made our own damn lights.

By the time I finished kissing her, we were both breathless, her lips red and swollen from my own, and it just made me want to kiss her more.

“Happy New Year, princess,” I whispered and went back for seconds.

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TWO WEEKS LATER

“Sit,” I ordered, holding the dog treat between my fingers. Camaro’s little pink tongue hung out of her mouth as she eyed the treat, but after a few more prompts, she finally sat on her hind legs. “Good girl,” I praised and tossed the treat toward her, which she almost caught.

At three and a half months, she was already at thirty-five pounds, and she was getting stronger and faster every day. Once we got back to the estate from our trip to Anchorage, Darren hired a personal dog trainer to come out and help me train Camaro. She blew past my expectations, learning basic commands in a matter of days. I was still working on some tricks of my own with her when we were by ourselves. She was able to keep me busy, and I welcomed the distraction now that I was back at the estate.

I had to admit something had changed since Darren and I returned from Alaska. He was somehow sweeter, gentler, less demanding when I was cooperative, and he made an effort to spend time with me outside of meals. He’d continued to care for my bite wound, removing the stitches himself like some kind of medical pro. It was healing nicely, but I knew it was going to scar. I could see the tiny teeth indents on my skin like an astrological sign, connecting the dots that told the story of how I was almost eaten by wolves... and admittedly, though begrudgingly... saved by Darren.

I almost felt guilty when he would look at my arm with disdain and regret, smoothing his hand over my skin like he could somehow rub it away. It shocked me to see the actual fear in his eyes when he recognized what that bite mark truly meant. He'd almost lost me that day, and I could see how much that pained him. I tried to make him forget about it by focusing on other things. We would go for walks with Camaro, watch a movie in the home theater, hell, he even requested my assistance when tuning his Ferrari. That had been an interesting day. Only he could make a grease-stained t-shirt look sexy.

Now that I had admitted my desires, I stopped bothering to hide my lust for him. I kicked my denial to the curb, and as soon as I did, I felt a million times better. I hated it, but Darren was right in one aspect. Letting go and accepting that had made my life a little easier, but luckily for me, the only thing I'd accepted was that my stupid vagina was blind, and there was no possible way of correcting her vision.

Until recently, I'd made several decisions based on the fuck-it scale, and I did not intend to make myself feel guilty. It was a survival tactic. Nothing more. Nothing less. I still hated the fucker with a fiery passion and refused to forget all the bullshit he had put me through and all the people he had killed. It went away in Cell Block C for compartmentalization. But until the time was right, I would endure because Darren was right about one other thing. I was stronger than the others were.

Pushing my vendetta aside, I allowed the contentment in my heart to settle. The new scars on my forearm from the wolf bite proved enough that I needed to quiet and just learn to live for a while. Darren had finally provided me with a fair distraction, one I still had a hard time accepting, but Camaro helped me forget. She was capable of forcing laughter from me, even when I didn't feel like it.

She'd bark at new people, scaring Anya and Irina when they came in for my bi-weekly waxing and nail session. When Camaro calmed down and let them pet her, they absolutely swooned over her, and it made me smile. They even painted her little nails a bright red color with doggy safe nail polish Anya happened to have in her bag for her own dogs. Darren said it looked ridiculous at first, but I got him to laugh when I told him to think of it as the blood of his enemies.

On a Saturday morning, I had been playing with Camaro in the gardens, laughing as she chased butterflies and barked at the birds chirping in the

birdbath. She still wasn't very good at staying by my side, but she always came when called. Camaro was the only real light I had now, and I clung to her like black on a crow.

Clive and Owen stood back about twenty feet behind, giving me the respectful distance I had requested from Darren. I'd only gotten it just a few days ago for good behavior, and I rewarded Darren well for giving in to my request, slowly conditioning him to want to please me as well. Those were the days when I could bring that man to his knees with pleasure so intense he'd have me for hours before his dick couldn't take anymore.

"Miss Jaden," Owen called from behind me. I turned to give him my attention. "Mr. Davis would like you to be ready to leave in a half hour. Clothes have been laid out for you on your bed. Please go ready yourself."

I furrowed my brows in confusion. Leave? Did I hear him right?

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Mr. Davis will tell you when he arrives to collect you."

Collect me. There's that object word again.

I sighed in annoyance, reached down to pick up Camaro, and headed back inside and up to my room. I hated not knowing what was going on. It made my hair stand on end when more and more circumstances were taken out of my control. Darren probably wanted to surprise me again, but he should know by now that I fucking hated his surprises.

When I got up to my bedroom, I placed Camaro in her bed next to mine and looked to find a very tight white mid-thigh length dress with a sweetheart neckline and bustier. A pair of strappy white heels was on the floor to match. Where the fuck was I going dressed like this?

I quickly changed into the dress and heels, fixed my makeup, and brushed my tousled hair. I put on some of the new diamond jewelry Darren had bought me for Christmas and sprayed some light perfume before pacing the room for the next several minutes, my heart racing with anxiety.

Where were we going? Why were we going? Who was going to be there? What would we be doing? The questions rolled in my mind like waves crashing against the inner walls of my head, searching for an answer. The last time I had been out of the house, I knew where we were going and why we were going, but having this suddenly dropped on me made me nervous. I didn't like not knowing shit.

A few moments later, Clive opened the door unannounced. "Miss Jaden," he said, but then his eyes scanned over me, noticing my appearance

and quickly approving. “Mr. Davis is downstairs waiting for you.”

I nodded, grabbed my accenting gold clutch containing my nude lipstick and some mints, and headed out the door, unsure that I would even need any of that shit. Darren was waiting in the foyer, talking on his phone and slowly pacing back and forth in a light gray suit and white shirt with the top buttons undone. No tie. The clicking of my heels on the stairs announced my arrival, causing Darren’s eyes to immediately find mine. With each step I took, those dark blues of his ate me up inch by inch, clearly approving.

“Yeah, we’ll see you when we get there,” he said into the phone and hung up.

“Where are we going?” I asked, trying not to sound too snarky.

Darren released a heavy breath through his nose as his eyes continued to travel over my body. His hands lifted to rub down my bare arms, creating goose bumps in their wake, but I welcomed the warmth and gentleness of his touch.

“You’ll see when we get there,” he said softly. “Right now, I just want to enjoy the sight of you in white.”

I blanched. I knew what kind of white he was referring to, and I didn’t want to think about that white ever, even though it was beyond the scope of my control.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said and took my hand in his to pull me out the door and into the pretty idling Ferrari in the driveway. Clive and Owen got into another black BMW behind ours while Darren ushered me into the passenger seat of the Ferrari. It was the sleekest shit I had ever seen. Red racing seats hugged my ass perfectly, and the comfortable design made it feel like a damn recliner. Getting to work on this beast was definitely a highlight of the week, especially when I got to impress Darren by proving that I knew my way around an engine.

I buckled my seat belt as Darren got into the driver’s seat and buckled himself in. He glanced at me quickly before putting the car in gear and taking off down the circle drive to the gate. Once we were on the open road, Darren really took off, obviously enjoying the capability of his car, especially since the tune-up. I couldn’t help but smile as we zoomed in and out of the traffic lanes, hugging the curves of the road and allowing the roar of the engine to vibrate through my skin.

“You’re smiling,” Darren commented with a smug grin.

Dammit.

“Would you like to know how to recreate it?”

“Do tell,” he said, his eyes never leaving the road.

“What are the chances you’d ever let me drive this?”

He scoffed, as if the idea was ridiculous, but then he glanced at me with a hint of curious amusement behind his eyes.

“Slim to none,” he finally answered.

I anticipated that.

“What if we played a game?” I asked, attempting to alleviate the stress of the impending evening. I had no idea where we were going, and I didn’t like that. I liked it even less that Darren was purposefully keeping it a mystery.

“A game, huh,” he reiterated, his eyes becoming serious.

“If I correctly guess where we’re going in ten questions or less, someday soon, within the next month, you have to let me drive this car.”

Darren chuckled, as if I had no chance of succeeding.

“And if you lose?”

I shrugged. “Then I don’t get to drive.” Duh.

Darren shook his head. “No. You’re asking me to sacrifice something for your benefit should you win. If I win, you will have to sacrifice something for my benefit as well. Not only will you have to sacrifice for your loss, but your winning guess must also include the reason for our attendance to this affair as well. Those are my terms if you want to play.”

Motherfucker... this was my game!

He spoke his words as if he were reciting a verbal contract, which I suppose in a way he was. He was a businessman, after all, and I could already see him turning the terms against me like the shark he was. It made me feel like I was losing already, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have the backbone to play.

I folded my arms and sat back in my seat, crossing my legs as I tried to think of what the fuck else I could possibly sacrifice for him. This was supposed to be fun, and now there were stakes being laid out.

“What do you want?”

“Road head on the way back home without complaint,” he announced plainly then flashed me that wicked grin of his that made my stomach flip.

I laughed, nearly rolling my eyes at his request. “And you’re confident you won’t accidentally run us off the road?”

“Extremely,” he replied seriously.

I watched him for a moment, noticing the aura of confidence he administered as he handled the car with such ease and skill. For its speed and capability, you really had to know what you were doing behind the wheel of a car like this. He made it look as easy as

breathing. And I could impress him just the same if he would only give me the chance.

“All right, deal,” I said smugly. I had this down.

“Ask your questions.”

“Well, based on my observations, you only seemed to have brought my personal guards along for the trip, so I’m going to assume we’re not going somewhere public, more likely private; otherwise, you’d have brought more backup.”

The right corner of Darren’s mouth lifted. Bingo.

“Correct,” he said with a nod.

“That wasn’t technically a question, merely an observation, but thanks for confirming it.”

He full-on smiled that time. “This should be amusing,” he said smugly, but I ignored him.

“Since we are going with fewer guards, I think it’s also safe to assume we’re going somewhere where you trust either the host or the location. I’m willing to bet it’s either a close friend or family member, but I won’t ask until I’m ready.”

Darren smiled again, obviously enjoying my assumptions.

“I’m also going to assume that based on what you’ve chosen for my attire, I’d say we’re probably going somewhere nice where others will be dressed up, like a dinner party. But you’ve neglected to wear a tie, something I rarely see, so you must not feel the need to impress based on your appearance. We’ll likely be in trusted company who knows you, and you’re comfortable with.”

This time Darren’s face remained that of stone.

“And since my attire is a little sexy, I’m willing to bet other men will be there, and you’re looking to show me off like some kind of trophy.”

Darren’s eyes darkened as he glared through the windshield. Another bingo.

“But it’s also early afternoon; a little early for a dinner party...” My thoughts drifted off as to what could possibly go on during the day to get a bunch of organized crime members together.

“Okay, first question. Is it a friend?”

“No,” Darren answered, maneuvering around a slower car in front of us.

“So that means it’s family,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Not necessarily,” he added. “It could also be a business associate.”

“You don’t consider business associates friends?”

“Of course, not. And that counts as a question.”

Damn him!

I glared at him. “You’re trying to make me second-guess myself and waste my questions. That won’t work.”

He smiled again smugly. “It just did.”

Damn him; a business associate was a logical option. Family or business associate? I had eight questions left, and I needed to make each one count.

“I doubt you trust your business associates as much as you do your family,” I said agitatedly.

Darren made no move to confirm or deny. Damn him.

“Family,” I finally gritted out, waiting for him to confirm.

He nodded. “Very good. Now, which family member?”

I turned my eyes back to the road, considering my options. He only had two younger brothers that I knew of, and his parents were gone, but what about cousins? Uncles? Aunts?

After a moment of consideration, I decided to go with the obvious.

“Is it one of your brothers?” I asked, my voice almost hopeful.

“Yes,” he replied. “But which one?”

Fuck, six questions left. If I got this one wrong, I’d be down to five, and I needed to conserve them as best I could. I still needed to determine a location and reason for our attendance. Fuck, how had this backfired on me already? It was my idea!

Okay, so who was more likely to host an event? The younger brother or middle brother? From what I could remember, the younger brother was younger than I was, while the middle was slightly older and married. But what if the younger brother was having a big stupid pool party or something? Couples tended to throw parties more often and the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

“We’re going to your middle brother’s house,” I said confidently, hoping like fuck I was right.

“How do you know it’s not my middle brother’s in-law’s house?”

My brows furrowed in frustration. “The simple fact that you are asking me that question tells me you are trying to lead me astray, and I do not appreciate your desperate and slimy tactics of diversion. Now, answer my question.”

Darren chuckled again. “Your deductive reasoning is impressive.”

“I was a law student at one point,” I mentioned sourly.

Darren nodded, his demeanor almost proud. “You were correct in your question.”

Goddamn right.

But five questions left. I had the who and the where, but now, I needed the why.

“Will there be more than fifty people there?”

“Yes.”

Okay, that was kind of a lot of people. I supposed I should get the obvious question out of the way.

“Is it just a simple get-together?”

“No. It is not a simple get-together. You need to be more specific than that. You have three chances left.”

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath.

“Watch it,” Darren warned, his grip tightening on the wheel.

Okay, so everyone was gathering for a specific reason. What reason got people together? The holidays were over so maybe it was more personal?

“Birthday?”

“No.”

Fuck, two.

“I’m wearing white, so it’s obviously not a wedding. That is not a question!” I blurted quickly. Darren just laughed.

“Retirement party?”

“No. Last chance.”

I groaned aloud now, and Darren laughed at my frustration. I had one question left, and it had to be my golden ticket to sitting behind the wheel of this beautiful beast.

It couldn’t be a baby shower; men didn’t attend those and women didn’t wear white to bridal showers either, another event men didn’t normally attend. Maybe it was a man’s event? I was obviously there to look good, maybe even distracting? I had only one conclusion for that.

“All right,” I said, blowing a strand of loose hair out of my face in exasperation. “How about a poker tournament?”

“Is that your final question?” Darren asked.

I huffed again, my arms folded over my chest as I glared at him. “Yes,” I bit out.

“I’m really going to enjoy that mouth of yours on me later tonight,” he affirmed arrogantly.

Son of a bitch!

I groaned out loud, but Darren just laughed.

“You played well, Jaden, but the odds were never in your favor.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I know how to tip the scale in my favor before you can even comprehend what you’re agreeing to. I am not easy to beat.”

I scoffed, nudging further into my seat. “I could beat you at plenty of things.”

“I doubt it.”

I turned and scowled at him. “Don’t be so cocky. I have a feeling I’d have quite the advantage in a game of Limbo.”

Darren full on laughed, and I found myself grunting with frustration.

“We’re here,” Darren announced a few minutes later. I turned my head from my sulking position to look out the window and noticed we had turned onto a private road. Passing through a black gate, expensive cars lined the side of the road while young men in obvious valet uniforms jogged to the front. When Darren finally pulled up to the house, my door was immediately opened, and I stepped out to eye the gorgeous mansion in front of us.

Just as Darren was rounding the hood of the car, my eyes locked on a very professional and extravagant looking sign that read: “In Welcoming of the Birth of Baby Ella Davis. Congratulations to Daniel and Katherine Davis.”

My jaw dropped so fast I felt it crack.

“A baby shower? You brought me to a frickin’ baby shower?” I said incredulously.

“Keep your voice down,” Darren admonished sternly, pulling me to the side while more cars pulled in.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was where we were going?”

“You said you wanted to guess,” Darren said nonchalantly.

It felt like my eyes were going to bulge out of my head.

“I had ruled showers out of my head since men don’t typically attend them.”

“A fair assumption, but in this family, every achievement is celebrated by both women *and* men.”

“So you thought you’d just blindsight me then?”

“You would have complained the entire ride here, and I didn’t feel like pulling over every five minutes to shut you up.”

“Then why bother to bring me? I suck at this kind of stuff.” My voice was quiet, but I couldn’t hide the high-pitched squeak that came from whispering so loudly.

“The idea sounded entertaining,” he said with a half-smile.

“What could possibly be so entertaining for you? It’s not like you’re going to let me talk to anyone.”

“On the contrary, I’m prepared to let you talk quite a bit. Your presence has been requested, after all.”

I jerked my head back, astonished.

“It was?”

“Multiple times actually, and I have finally decided to oblige those requests.”

“By who?”

“My family,” Darren answered slyly.

My eyes avoided his to latch on to anything else as I tried to wrap my brain around the situation. I was going to be surrounded by his family, where I would likely be judged from every angle, picked and prodded at to see how I twitched under pressure. This was a test, an exercise to see how I could handle myself under the eyes of many. But that was fine, because while they were examining me, I would be examining them. Tonight, I would be a sponge and soak up every drop of information available. I would add more faces to my list of deaths to come.

“What are the rules?” I asked dryly. I knew there would be some stipulations to this.

Darren smiled smugly. “Don’t disappoint me,” he said simply and took my arm to link it through his. “But should you do so, know that I won’t hesitate to take you over my knee in front of the entire party, got it?”

I gulped back my trepidation, and failed to hide my scowl. Fuck that noise.

“Duly noted.”

“Good girl,” he said and escorted me toward the house.

Thanks for the pep talk.

Clive and Owen stood off near the curb of the driveway, watching as more guests arrived and headed into the lavish house. My heart raced in my chest while my fingernails bit into Darren’s forearm. My bodyguards stepped in line behind us as we passed them, my heels clicking on the stone pavement as we walked toward the door where my enemies mingled behind, celebrating the birth of a cursed child.

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46

MEET THE FAMILY



Jaden's body was beyond stiff as I escorted her inside Dan's house. I could feel her eyes scanning every little thing that they came across, and it did nothing but make me laugh inside. She would gain no information here that would leave her with an advantage. Only a few of our shared business partners were in attendance, and I had no intention of introducing her to them. Half were friends or close associates while the other half were from what was left of Katherine's side of the family, and though my fingers twitched to eliminate every single one of them, I resisted the urge.

Walking through the foyer, I had to admit Dan had a pretty nice setup. Though it wasn't as large as my estate, it was still decent enough for the two of them. Dan's house was modern and sleek, a multitude of dark and light shades of gray coloring the interior while large rectangular vertical windows gave way for natural light. The house was always beyond spotless; not even a speck of dust lingered in the air, a result of Dan's OCD. He was a neat freak—had been ever since our mom had been killed—and now, Katherine got to be with one to deal with his rage fits when shit got out of order. Served the bitch right.

I spotted Dan immediately, standing by the sofa talking to an associate of ours while Katherine stood beside him quietly, her hands folded in front of her as she pretended to listen to him talk. The sound of my heavy footsteps alerted him to my arrival, and he quickly dismissed his

conversation before taking Katherine's hand and hurrying over to Jaden and me.

"You made it!" Daniel said enthusiastically as he slowed his pace to stop before us. "Finally!"

Dan's eyes roamed over Jaden's form, quickly assessing her before raising his eyes back to mine and lifting an eyebrow. I rolled my eyes in response.

"Daniel, this is Jaden. Jaden, this is my middle brother, Daniel Davis, and his wife, Katherine."

Katherine smiled and nodded her head at Jaden. "Hello," she said quietly, keeping her hands folded under the large round swell of her stomach.

"Very nice to meet you," Dan said, taking Jaden's hand and clasping it gently.

"You as well and congratulations, by the way," Jaden said politely, but there was a sense of confidence in her tone I didn't like. It usually meant trouble in the future.

"Oh, thank you," Katherine said with a shy smile.

"Dom here yet?" I asked Dan, wondering where our youngest brother was.

"You know Dom. He'll be fashionably late," Dan answered.

"Unsurprisingly," I replied, and Dan nodded in agreement

"Well, now that introductions are over, why don't you and Jaden go take a seat at our table, and we'll see you guys as soon as we're done greeting everyone. Dinner should start in a half hour."

I nodded at Dan and took Jaden across the room to the double doors that led outside where the tables were set up. Over a dozen round tables were equipped with umbrellas to provide shade from the bright sun overhead. Guests were scattered everywhere; some sitting while others walked and talked amongst each other. The women were giggling and gossiping amongst themselves, ignoring the men as they talked business behind them. About a dozen guards in black suits roamed the area; black sunglasses shielded their eyes and offered a special infrared vision in the daylight.

"Well, look who finally decided to show up," came a familiar voice behind me.

I turned on a smile "Matt," I said, acknowledging my oldest friend since we were young boys.

Matt's dark brown hair lingered over his light blue eyes just enough to cloud them from me. He was about an inch shorter than I was and much leaner, but his profession didn't involve as much of a necessity for combat as mine did. Matt was an international arms dealer—my best connection to as much firepower as I wanted from all over the globe. He dealt with government contracts to supply just about anything from ammunition to grenades to fucking tanks. He had access to it all and made millions doing it. What was even better was that most of it was perfectly legal.

"This her?" he asked, pointing at Jaden with a wide, excited smile. Matt had been there when I had purchased Jaden right after he'd purchased his first slave. I'd never seen him so shocked in my life.

"It is," I said with a nod. "Jaden, this is a very good friend of mine, Matthew Rainer. Matt, this is Jaden."

"An absolute pleasure," he said almost seductively as he held his hand out for Jaden's.

She glanced at me for permission, and I gave her the go-ahead with a nod, prideful that she knew well enough to ask before touching another man that wasn't family.

Good girl.

"Nice to meet you," she said flatly as she took his hand.

I had no reason to conflict with Matt for reasons of jealousy concerning Jaden. He had his own slave to toy with, and he would respect my boundaries with Jaden just as I would respect his. What was meant to be a quick handshake for Jaden left her shocked when Matt didn't let go and instead turned the inside of her wrist up to face him. I knew he would want to examine her tattoos.

"This is nice," he said, admiring the ink. "Wish you would have waited to off the guy before I had a chance to book him. I was thinking of having this done."

Jaden's eyes went wide with confusion as they quickly met mine for confirmation thanks to Matt's little knowledge bomb. I had planned to keep that little secret to myself.

"I'll get you another contact. Now, get your damn hands off her," I almost growled.

Matt chuckled and released Jaden's hand, which then quickly retreated back to her middle.

“Oh, my God! Darren? Is that you?” came an annoyingly high-pitched feminine voice from behind Matt.

“Regina is here?” I asked Matt, annoyed now.

He shrugged. “She’s the party planner.”

“Of course, she is.”

Regina was Matt’s cousin, and though she had the face of a Greek goddess, she had the mind of a box of crayons. I lost count of the number of times I had shoved my dick in her mouth just to keep her from letting more stupid leak out. She had been an on-and-off fuck toy for several years before I finally got sick of her. Her only redeeming quality was that she could suck cock like a pro, but I had a feeling it was because most guys had the same idea as I did with shutting her up.

Regina’s dyed dark red hair hung well past her shoulders, her loose curls bouncing against her fake tits as she made her way over to us in six-inch bright red stiletto heels. Her long legs went on forever, so I had no idea why she needed the extra height. She was already five-foot-nine and barely over a hundred pounds. With her stick thin figure, I had always wondered how I managed to fuck her without accidentally breaking a single bone in her body. That was one of the many things I loved about Jaden. She may be small, but her well-muscled body gave her better durability against me, giving me the assurance I needed to know that she could handle a little tough love.

“Hey, Dare!” Regina said way too enthusiastically as she finally caught up to us.

“Regina,” I said with a polite nod. She might have annoyed the fuck out of me, but she was still Matt’s cousin.

“I didn’t expect to see you here!”

I furrowed my brows. “This is my brother’s baby shower.”

“Oh, right, duh,” she said with that irritating giggle of hers. “Oh... and who’s this? New fuck toy?” she asked inquisitively as her eyes finally landed on Jaden.

Jaden’s nails instantly dug into the sleeve of my jacket while Regina’s dark green eyes did their classic up-down as they scanned Jaden from head to foot, judging every inch of her. I narrowed my gaze in warning.

“Play nice, Regina. This is Jaden. Jaden, Regina,” I offered as introductions, though I wanted Jaden to have nothing to do with her.

“Regina Rainer,” Regina said, that snippety attitude she always had when she was jealous showing up and offered her hand to Jaden. “Darren and I go way back.”

If by way back, she meant the way back of her throat.

“Nice to meet you,” Jaden said, a dark edge to her tone as she shook Regina’s hand.

“Oh, ouch,” Regina complained, drawing her hand back and shaking it. “Good grip. She’s a bit short for you, isn’t she?”

I scoffed. Shit, this was going to be fun. I could feel the rage coming off Jaden already.

“Regina, don’t you have shit to do around here?” Matt said, interrupting the growing tension.

“Always do,” she said with an annoyed sigh. “I’ll see you later,” she said with a flirty smile and sauntered her way through the crowd.

“Come on, let’s go sit down,” I said and led Jaden away to the table.

“How do you know that walking disaster?” Jaden asked under her breath.

“She’s Matt’s cousin,” I answered as I sat her down at our table. The information was irrelevant, so I didn’t mind sharing.

Jaden looked at me strangely for a moment, as if trying to figure something out in her head... until the lightbulb finally turned on.

“You used to fuck her, didn’t you?” she asked quietly.

I sat down in my chair and eyed her smugly.

“Does that make you jealous?”

She scoffed and sat back in her seat. “Not in the slightest. Although, I do have to reconsider your intelligence, knowing that you found pleasure in that bag of plastic garbage.”

I chuckled. “Maybe I was trying to fuck the stupid out of her.”

“Your methods were obviously lacking,” she said bitterly.

“I can only do so much for a lost cause. Now, what would you like to drink?”

“What are my options?”

Smart girl.

“Limitless,” I replied, my lips forming into a smirk.

She raised an eyebrow at me in challenge before leaning closer, the scent of her sweet skin filling my nose as her lips met my ear.

“How about a hurricane?” she said seductively, making my cock twitch with her voice alone.

“Think you can handle it?”

“The storm hasn’t washed me away yet,” she replied, her nails lightly scratching against my thigh.

“A hurricane it is,” I nearly growled, gripping her wrist and tearing it from my legs before she made the tent in my pants any bigger. “Do not leave this chair,” I ordered and stood to head to the bar while Clive and Owen watched a few feet behind Jaden’s chair.

Matt was already there, ordering himself a glass of whiskey. I ordered Jaden’s drink as well as a glass of scotch for me.

“She’s gorgeous,” Matt commented, his unabashed smile taking up the majority of his face as he watched Jaden.

“She’s also unequivocally mine,” I replied sternly.

Matt chuckled. “Relax, Dare. It’s just an observation.”

“I thought you were too distracted by your own new slave to pay attention to anything else.”

Matt sighed, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips. “She is quite the distraction. One I can’t seem to get enough of. I don’t know why I didn’t participate in the auction sooner.”

“There’s another one coming up next week if you want a second,” I said with a smirk.

“Nah, one slave is enough for me. Her training is coming along too well. I don’t need another distraction to screw that up.”

“Well, if you ever change your mind...” I added, leaving the suggestion open to him.

“You know; you should consider bringing Jaden over. I bet the reunion would be interesting,” Matt offered.

I thought about it for a second wondering how Jaden would react to seeing an old friend. It didn’t sound like a good idea.

“I thought you just said you didn’t need someone screwing up your slave’s training.”

Matt chuckled. “Suddenly, you’re not so confident in your slave’s training and behavior?”

“Jaden is not a slave,” I said, turning back to look at her, admiring her from afar. “She’s so much more than that. But a reunion could prove problematic.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I just want to eat and get drunk.”

Our drinks were then placed on the bar, and we both headed back to the table. I found Jaden’s eyes fully engrossed on Dan and Katherine as they continued to greet other guests. I set her drink down in front of her a little harder than usual to redirect her attention and leaned into her ear.

“You will find no useful information here to use against me. Stop bothering,” I said darkly. I knew she was going to play the role of a sponge tonight, gathering as much information and detail as she could to use against me later. But nothing of importance to her was here tonight.

“You mistake my intentions,” she said quietly, turning her eyes away. “I tend to people watch in crowds. It’s an old habit.”

Old habit, my ass.

Jaden took a long sip of her drink and moaned in satisfaction. “Mmm... damn, that’s good.”

“Good. Focus on that for a while.”

“You got it,” she said, taking another sip.

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Dinner turned into an interesting event. We shared a table with Dan, Katherine, Matt, and regrettably Regina. Dom still hadn't shown yet, and I was getting pissed that he was late for this. Family was the most important thing in this business, and if you didn't prove that, you became untrustworthy. At least Jaden was sitting quietly at my side while irrelevant conversation played out in front of her. I'd spoken with Dan and Matt to make sure business was left out of the conversation. I didn't need Jaden picking up on anything she need not worry about.

"So Jaden," Regina called out from across the table. "Where did you get your hair color done?" she asked. "I've been dying to get that color for years."

Jaden cleared her throat before answering. "Genetics Salon and Spa," she said, and everyone around the table immediately chuckled, myself included.

Smartass.

Regina looked confused. "Darren, is that downtown?" she asked me.

I scoffed, trying my best to curb my laughter. "Jaden is a natural redhead, Regina."

"Oh... well she could have just said that," she replied quietly and went back to picking at her salad.

"Where're my brothers at!" came a loud, obnoxious voice off in the distance. I didn't even need to turn around to know Dominic had finally arrived.

"Here, Dom," Dan yelled, waving at him.

I could hear Dom making his way over to our table, and for some reason, I felt myself cringe. He was going to fuck this up somehow; I just knew it.

“What’s going on, family?” he said enthusiastically. I looked up at him to find a tall young woman with long, dark brown hair and full pink lips clinging to his arm. She looked as though she were a piece of candy stuck to his sleeve.

“Dominic, nice of you to finally show up,” I admonished him.

He gave me that signature look he always does when he blows off my scolding.

“What? I had business to take care of,” he said, taking a seat while the brunette sat down next to him. I knew exactly what he meant by “business.”

Looking over his date, I recognized her immediately. She’d been one of the slaves in the bi-weekly auctions from the beginning of the year. She didn’t sell due to her height, so we sent her to Dom in Vegas. Obviously, he found a purpose for her after all. She took one look at me, and the fear of recognition instantly lit up. Luckily for her, she’d only ever have to see me once, but once was enough for most of them.

“Holy shit, is this her?” Dom asked, pointing at Jaden.

I nodded. “Jaden, this is my youngest brother, Dominic. Dominic, this is Jaden.”

Jaden gave Dominic a small nod, and he just smiled.

“Damn, you picked a good one, brother. Boris wasn’t lying!”

Speaking of Boris...

I recently discovered his family had pulled him off life support a few weeks ago. Edmund had apparently appeared at the funeral wearing a black hand prosthetic. The thought had me grinning inside.

With Dominic happily steering the conversation to his latest venture to Tijuana, my eyes fell to Jaden, noticing how often she avoided making eye contact with anyone, including myself. She was quiet until she was spoken to, and it was rare. I wasn’t that surprised she wasn’t met with more conversation considering they were more afraid of my reaction to their questions than Jaden’s response. But the one person who didn’t sense the warning was the one person I wanted Jaden to have the least amount of interaction with – Regina. I was afraid at one point Jaden was going to leap across the table and strangle Regina herself. I might have actually allowed the entertainment. I’d never seen Jaden so annoyed in my life.

It made me wonder why I thought to bring her to this in the first place. While others saw her as the pretty jewel on my arm, I saw her as the tiger with the chain leash. But the whole point of this was to test her. She did well in Alaska, and now, I wanted to see how she handled the family. For the most part, she did well masking her emotions during the dinner conversations, but I caught every slip she made when her glares would sneak through the cracks of her concrete resolve. I had to give her props for catching herself quickly before anyone else noticed. The only thing she wasn't able to hide was her subtle interest in the girl sitting one chair over. I didn't like it.

When mention of my unborn niece came around, I noticed Jaden shrink into herself, her face becoming pale. Her knee began to bounce, the clear indication she was nervous and uncomfortable. Jaden knew that just as Dan had expected children from Katherine, I expected the same thing from her. I knew she didn't have much experience with children to go on, but she would someday find her motherly instinct and make it work. And yet, through all her obvious insecurities, she still managed to find her voice.

"What made you choose the name, Ella?" she asked. I tensed slightly at her question, knowing the sensitivity of the answer.

Katherine gave Jaden a sad smile before looking to Dan, silently asking for permission to answer. He gave her the tiniest of nods.

"It was my little sister's middle name," she replied.

Jaden's eyebrows furrowed slightly as the weight of Katherine's words reigned in.

"Was?"

"Well, I think it's time for dessert, huh? Aren't you two supposed to cut a cake or something?" Matt chimed in to divert the conversation. I found myself thankful.

"Yes, I believe you're right. Come on, Katherine," Dan said, taking Katherine's hand and helping her from her seat.

With dinner now over, the band began to play upbeat music, encouraging a few couples to head to the dance floor. When Dan and Katherine were nearly out of sight, Jaden leaned in to me.

"What did she mean 'was'?" she asked.

"None of your business, that's what." I stood, buttoning my jacket back in place. "Now I have some business to attend to while I'm here. You're

free to walk around, but mind your conversations. Clive and Owen will be watching *and* listening.”

Jaden waved me off like I was a fly in her face, pursing her lips in rebellion as I turned away from her. I was waiting for many of the business partners attending the shower to bombard me, and I didn’t need Jaden within earshot of those conversations.

During my discussions, I kept Jaden within my peripherals, wanting to know where she was at all times and what she was doing. She was such a damn beautiful distraction, another reason I should have left her at home. I went against my own judgment when I said I wouldn’t let her off the estate for a long-ass time, but if she could display good behavior at moments like this, maybe I’d change my mind. I did want to be able to trust her eventually, but that was years in the making.

And that potential trust was immediately diminished when I caught her having a conversation with Dominic’s date. I didn’t know how long they had been talking, but the moment I saw it, I signaled to Clive and Owen to break it up. I didn’t need Jaden stumbling upon information that didn’t concern her. As the girl was removed from the table, Jaden glared at me from across the way. I returned it with the slight shake of my head, my face completely blank when she slammed her hand on the table and rose from her seat. My eyes followed her as she began to wander about the party, Clive and Owen not far behind.

As I made my way through-out the party, I approached Dominic, who was ordering his fourth drink from the bartender, and slapped my palm against his shoulder.

“You need to keep better track of your date,” I said.

“Why? What’s she doing?” he asked, his face suddenly warped with anger as he turned to search for her.

“Talking,” I said. “We both know a silent slave is an obedient slave.”

He nodded. “I’ll take care of it.” He then snapped his fingers, summoning a nearby guard and whispered into his ear. A few moments later, the girl was escorted to the table nearest our sights where she would remain for the rest of the party. I could see the warning glare Dominic was giving her from where he sat, further satisfying me that he had things under control.

“So... how’s Vegas?” I asked him.

“It’s great,” he said, taking his drink and nearly slamming it back. “You should come for a visit soon; see the new club some time. It’s doing really well. You could even bring your new gem. I bet she’d love it.”

Yeah, I bet she’d love to see a bunch of half-naked slaves crawling around on their hands and knees while balancing drink trays on their bare backs.

“We’ll see. I have been meaning to come out there, see how you’re handling things.”

“I’ve been handling things just fine,” he said begrudgingly. “I’ve been at this for over a year now. Everything’s good.”

“How’s the deal with Rourke coming along then?”

Dominic rolled his eyes. “Negotiations are coming along fine. There are some permits that have to be secured first, but we’re working on that.”

That made me furrow my brows.

“It’s been months, Dom. This deal was easy. Construction should have begun weeks ago.”

I had trusted Dominic with orchestrating a deal to construct a new warehouse in Vegas for our human trafficking operations since the old one was practically falling apart. And here he was, months later, still working on permits. For fucks sake...

He scoffed. “This deal is petty and you know it. Why am I wasting time on little \$100,000 contracts when I should be handling the million dollar ones?”

“Because you’re not seasoned enough to handle them yet. If you can’t negotiate the smaller ones within a few weeks, then how do you expect to handle the ones with more at stake on the table?”

“Because they’re actually worth my time. That’s why,” he snapped.

I shook my head. “You still have a long way to go, brother.”

He rolled his eyes, making me grit my teeth in irritation.

“Speaking of a long way to go, how’s your redhead acclimating?” he asked, his eyes now landing on Jaden as she stood off towards the side of the house, watching the band.

I forced myself not to glare at him. “She’s doing just fine.”

“*Fine* is right,” he sneered.

“Focus on your date, Dominic. Or have you forgotten her again already?”

He scoffed. “She’s sitting at the table like a good little kitten. No worries.”

A bad taste suddenly resonated in my mouth when I turned my head to see Regina make her way over to Jaden, who was standing near the house, watching the band, and immediately started chatting her up. Regina’s signature bitch stance took over as she leaned on her hip and rested her hand over it. I couldn’t tell what they were discussing, but given that Regina’s movements were jerky and sharp, she was not being pleasant, yet Jaden remained unfazed and well composed. In fact, she had a sly smirk lurking at the corner of her lips the entire time until she finally burst out laughing. I could see Regina’s face heat up for a moment before she suddenly lifted her fist and snapped it out towards Jaden’s face. Jaden merely sidestepped Regina’s attack, causing her fist to collide right into the side of the house that had been at Jaden’s back. Regina’s screech could be heard over the entire crowd, even as the band played on.

“Damn it,” I whispered under my breath.

“Oh, shit!” Dominic immediately started laughing. “Did you just see that?”

“Ice,” I said to the bartender, holding my hand out. He placed a large glass filled with ice on the bar and I emptied a few of the cubes into several napkins and bundled them up.

“Excuse me,” I said to Dom, immediately standing and heading over to the spectacle.

Clive and Owen were already separating Jaden from Regina, Regina clutching her now bleeding hand to her stomach and panting like she was going to bleed to death.

If only she’d do us all a favor.

Jaden was smirking from a far as I took Regina’s hand and placed the iced filled napkins over her knuckles. She whimpered and sniffled as I held the ice in place. It wasn’t even broken and she was crying like it was the end of the world.

“Thank you, Darren. That’s so nice of you,” she said, sniffling back tears. But the moment her eyes flashed a look of victory towards Jaden, I flashed a smile of my own.

Increasing the pressure of the ice against her hand, Regina gasped as I regained her attention. “Ouch! What are you—“

“You ever make a swing at Jaden like that again and I won’t hesitate to let her beat the ever-living shit out of you. You understand? Matt’s cousin or not, I won’t stand for it.”

“Ow, ow! You’re hurting me!” she cried.

“Do you understand?” I reiterated through gritted teeth, pushing down on her injured hand.

“Ow! Yes!”

Upon her words, I instantly removed the pressure of the ice, took her other hand and placed it on top of the ice to keep it still and released her.

“You should learn to play nice, Regina. It will suit you better.”

Her only response was to bite her quivering lip as she looked up at me in disbelief. I shook my head and turned away from her to take Jaden by the arm and lead her away.

“Well played, Jaden, now let’s get the hell out of here,” I said.

“Ugh, now? But things were just starting to get interesting!” she whined sarcastically.

“You can brawl with Regina another time, but right now I’m looking to cash in on a debt.”

“Ha!”

As we headed for the door, Matt came walking towards us, obviously unaware of his cousin’s obnoxiousness.

“What happened?” he asked, his eyes looming over toward Regina still standing by the house with the ice on her hand.

“Control your cousin, Matt. Apparently, she likes to throw punches and miss.”

“Ah, shit,” he sighed. “I’ll take care of it.”

As Matt headed off to Regina, I waved goodbye to Dan and Katherine and escorted Jaden out to the front of the house, Clive and Owen not far behind us. Once the valet had brought the cars around, I ushered Jaden into the passenger seat before buckling myself in. I couldn’t have pulled out of the driveway fast enough.

“First things first. What did Regina say to you to cause that fiasco?” I asked.

Jaden chuckled. “She wanted to know what my intentions were.”

I snorted. Even I couldn’t deny the hilarity in that.

“What did you tell her?”

“I took a page from your book and told her my intentions were none of her business.”

I smirked.

Brat.

“I imagine she took a page from your book and hated that answer?”

Jaden nodded. “So much so that she felt the need to call me a gold-digging whore who’d better watch her back because apparently Regina is capable of anything.”

I snorted again. “That was when you busted out laughing, right?”

“The exact moment.”

I shook my head and laughed.

“At least I now know she’s capable of punching walls,” she said with a shrug.

“You won’t have to worry about her anymore. I told her you’ll get full reign to knock her out if it gets to that point.”

“Excellent,” Jaden said, an evil little smirk peering across her lips.

When we were finally on the highway, I pulled down the zipper of my pants to free the straining erection that had been building since we left. “Alright, time to pay up, princess,” I said. I could see her eyes on my lap, a small smirk on her lips.

“I hope you’re good at multitasking,” she said. “Because I’m about to push your ability to the limit.”

Before I had a chance to respond, her hot, wet mouth was already swallowing my dick whole.

“Fuck,” I groaned.

Jaden sucked on my cock like she was starving for my cum, and it was the sexiest fucking thing. My knuckles turned white as I gripped the steering wheel; my other hand was on the shifter but wishing it were between her legs. She certainly was testing my multitasking ability.

Jaden’s tongue swirled and stroked expertly, and when I finally had the chance, my right hand gripped her tight little ass. The moan that vibrated in her throat made my cock twitch, and I had to admit, she did make me forget which direction we were going for a moment or two. She had power over me at this moment—the only time I ever allowed it—when she could nearly bring me to my knees with the way she sucked me off, the things she could make me feel. She lived for that small moment of power exchange, but she should know it was nothing but an illusion.

The suction from her greedy mouth had me coming in minutes, my load shooting down her throat, which she swallowed without issue. After sucking every last drop of cum, she cleaned her plate like a good little kitten and sat up to wipe her mouth with the back of her hand, a wicked grin on her face. I tucked my cock back into my pants, downshifted, and then took off, racing down the freeway. I didn't want the smile on Jaden's face to fade, so I pressed the button for the convertible top to lower and allowed the wind around us to flow through Jaden's beautiful red hair. The genuine laugh she released made my heart clench in my chest. I fucking loved that sound. So I turned up Ludacris, and Jaden just laughed aloud, not even hesitating to start rapping along with the song, all fucks out the window. I'd never felt myself smile as big as I did when I watched her spit those lyrics as if she didn't have a care in the world. And I decided right then and there that making her smile would become one of my top priorities.

I would see Jaden in a white dress, a baby in her arms, a smile on her face, and blood on her hands if it was the last thing I ever did.

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I lost count of the weeks that went by after the baby shower. I was hoping that night would at least be somewhat useful, and it turned out that it was. I knew something was up with that girl Darren's brother had brought. I could feel it the moment she looked at Darren, and it only happened once. I caught the fear in her eyes immediately, recognized it like reading a fucking stop sign. She knew who Darren was, and I had a feeling I knew exactly how she did.

When she had first spoken to me, she asked how I knew Darren. Her voice was quiet, meek, and I didn't like it. I could smell opportunity knocking, and I didn't want to scare it away, but I didn't want to attract unwanted attention either. I kept my eyes on the table as I addressed her, not wanting to give away the impression that we were actually speaking.

"I have a feeling you already know the answer," I quietly said to her.

She gulped so loud I could hear it.

"You were sold, too," I stated, my eyes staring at the flower arrangement on the table.

"Yes," she whispered, fear coating that entire syllable. It made my heart plummet into the pit of my stomach. It was so easy to forget sometimes that the man I occasionally found slight amusement in was still selling girls as sex slaves. It hurt so deep; I could feel it down to the marrow of my bones.

"How long ago?" I asked.

She was silent for a moment before she answered. "Fourteen months."

“Jesus.”

“Are you... his?” she asked me, barely making eye contact.
I nodded.

“Oh, God,” she nearly whimpered, covering her trembling lips with her palm. “I’m so sorry.”

I ignored her worry. I was more interested in where she came from and where she currently was.

“And you’re Dominic’s?”

She sniffled back some tears and wiped her nose. “No. He just brought me here to keep him company.”

“Brought you from where?”

“Las Vegas.”

I tried not to let my panic surface. Of course, Darren’s reaches extended to fucking Vegas. That must be where his youngest brother runs his end of the organization.

“Are there more of you?”

She nodded. “Many more of us. We work in the underground clubs.”

“Doing what?”

A single tear slipped down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away with the tips of her fingers. “Whatever they tell us.”

I felt my teeth grate against each other. I knew exactly what that meant.

“If you were sold, how did you end up working in Vegas?”

She shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. I just went where they took me and did what I was told. I didn’t want to end up like the other girls.”

I lost the will to remain passive after that and looked directly at her. She was pretty. Long dark brown hair, slight traces of Asian facial features, and beautiful olive-toned skin.

“What happened to the other girls?”

“After they were beaten? I don’t know. Sometimes, we never saw them again.” She suddenly shook her head and sighed. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this.”

Right. Silence equaled obedience.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Miss Dalia,” Owen had said, obviously interrupting us and moving closer. “Please remove yourself from the table. Your conversation is over.”

Dalia gasped at the mention of her name and quickly shot up from her chair. “I’m so sorry,” she said without looking at me. “Excuse me.” She

hurried away from the table and was gone within moments. I turned my head in annoyance only to connect with the dark gaze of the man responsible for the interruption. I glared at him something fierce, and all he did was shake his head in warning.

Anger rising in my gut, I couldn't stop myself from slamming my hand down on the table and shooting off from my seat. Fully intending to engross myself in distraction, I found the band to be the only thing qualified. And it wasn't fifteen minutes later, an even better distraction engaged me.

Thinking back to my encounter with Regina, she was lucky I hadn't busted her already Botox injected lips. Her mouth was her most annoying feature, and I thought that maybe if her lips were a little bit more swollen than they already were, she'd be incapable of moving them. I had never met a more blissfully ignorant, vain as hell, bimbo bitch in my entire life. The urge to reach across the table and slap the stupid out of her was stronger than ever, but Darren's influence over my self-control was somehow stronger at that moment. I could tell he found my distaste for her amusing.

When discussions of Darren's unborn niece came up, I'd grown nervous, the pit of my stomach twisting away with too much anxiety to bear. I refused to look at Darren during those conversations, not wanting to give him the idea I was interested in becoming something I was not ready for.

I did NOT want to have kids with him. I wanted kids eventually, but my reproductive system was reserved for one man, and he was currently hiding away in Germany, protecting the only family I had left. I had never been more grateful that the birth control implant in my arm was still active. I hoped it remained there for a very long time. At least until I could figure a way out of my situation.

Aside from the rest of the painfully materialistic mafia bitches there, the only exception was Katherine. She was a serious mystery to me. Something didn't sit right with her, and it had me on edge. She was quiet, meek, but the look in her eyes was something I could only describe as haunted, especially when she looked at Darren. I wanted to ask about her, but I didn't want Darren to think I was snooping.

When he refused to elaborate on the fact that Katherine's younger sister had been referred to in the past tense, it gave light to something that had obviously been kept in the dark; and it obviously brought misery for Katherine. Something awful had happened to her sister and giving her

daughter her sister's middle name in her honor was definitely something to note.

I had a new puzzle on the table before me, and eventually, I was going to put those damn pieces together and discover the picture hiding behind it all. For all I knew, it held the key to Darren's destruction.

Besides Anchorage, the baby shower had been the only thing to interrupt my routine, so now I was back to being bored again except for when Darren was around. He had somehow finally become somewhat good company when he wasn't an asshole. Camaro kept me company and made me smile, but I still longed for more. I tried engaging in conversation with Clive and Owen simply for the purpose of communicating with another human being, but they weren't much for conversation. I still teased them as often as I could, but they never reacted. Bastards.

At least, I didn't have to worry about them beyond the trees. Camaro loved going out in the woods. She'd chase after the squirrels, bark at the birds, and play in the stream when we went by it. She even loved the ocean but stayed out of the water since it was still too cold to go swimming. I'd found the old bo I had hidden by the tree so long ago and went back to practicing. Sometimes, I'd find a rock, and after several attempts, I'd be able to hit it with the bo like a baseball bat. It quickly became my precision exercise. I'd hit the rocks, and Camaro would run and fetch them. Eventually, the rocks would get smaller, and I'd make sure they went into the stream so Camaro wouldn't accidentally swallow them. My bo skills were improving immensely, and I welcomed the distraction, but my life still felt like it was at a standstill.

While my ultimate goal was still to kill Darren, destroy his empire, and walk away to find my family, I had nothing else to motivate me to live. Most of my life was built on my education to get a great job and make something of myself, start a family, and enjoy the fruits of my labor, but now that was all shot to shit. I was nothing more than a trophy to Darren, and I felt my luster begin to dull. My days rolled by one after the other, sometimes never coming into contact with anyone besides Clive and Owen, and it made me feel like I was going nowhere. I was nothing but a hamster bored of her running wheel, constantly running but never gaining a fucking inch. Time was just passing me by with no regard for my wants or desires.

All I ever did was wait. Wait for the next bit of useful information, wait for the next domino to fall, wait for my moment to strike, wait for Darren to

find and kill my family, wait for him to fuck me... Everything was done on Darren's time, at his pace, his schedule, and I was just a passenger along for the ride. It was not what I was used to at all.

When I was with Jason, I did what I wanted, when I wanted, wherever I wanted, and he trusted me every step of the way. Darren sought to treat me like a child, and the longer I waited for him to trust me, the harder it was to wait. I was tired of waiting on him, waiting for him to make the next decision about my life, where I went, what I wore, what I ate, who I talked to. It had been nearly two months since I'd been back from the island, and I knew how hard it was going to be coming back here, living in a shadow darker than the last, but it was becoming increasingly difficult not to let it swallow me whole.

Once again, I needed more, and Darren was catching on.

"Camaro is trying to play with you," Darren said, catching me off guard.

I looked down from my chair to find Camaro trying to pry her rope toy out of my hand. I'd been sitting out on the patio, playing fetch with Camaro and watching the waves of the ocean crash against the shore. I'd forgotten to throw the rope I was so lost in thought. Lightly tugging on the rope, I told Camaro to let go, and with one final tug, she did. I rewarded her with a long toss over the grass, and she eagerly ran off in search of her toy. I went back to staring at the ocean.

"She's getting bigger," Darren commented as he watched Camaro snatch her rope.

"Almost fifty pounds," I added. She was getting bigger and stronger by the day.

"Good. She will be a good guard dog for you."

I almost rolled my eyes. "They say dogs are a girl's best friend," I said with a sigh. "My only friend..."

Darren returned my sigh with his own, but his was of irritation. I could see him pinching the bridge of his nose as he sat down in the chair next to me.

"What is it now, Jaden?" he asked, his voice clipped with annoyance.

I had to answer him honestly. With the way my mood was, he would never accept the typical "I'm fine, nothing's wrong" answer. Honesty was his only policy, and for the most part, I didn't mind it, except for when it was likely to get me in trouble. Like right now.

“I can’t think of the right word to describe it right now,” I said gently.

“Try.” His voice did not leave much room for patience.

I sighed, and rubbed my face with my hands. “I just feel like I’m at a standstill. Like I’m always waiting. It’s a very hollow feeling inside, if that makes any sense.”

“It doesn’t,” he jabbed.

Of course, it doesn’t.

I cleared my throat. “Let me ask you something.” And I couldn’t believe I was actually going to ask him this. “Would you allow me female friendships if they were from your inner circle?” I asked softly.

Darren’s brow furrowed, his face too serious for me to become optimistic.

“No.”

I felt my face heat with anger and surprise. “Why? You would know them!”

“That doesn’t matter. But I want to know where this little idea sparked from. Is there someone in particular you’re interested in?” he asked.

I gulped back my response, hoping it would be received well. “What about Katherine?”

“Absolutely not,” he said with zero hesitation, zero consideration.

“Why not?” I asked incredulously.

“Because I said so. That is all the explanation you need.”

I huffed and turned away from him. I should have known better than to bother.

But then, he suddenly started chuckling. “I could always set up a playdate for you and Regina, though, if you’d like.”

And now, he was making fun of me. *Asshole.*

“Not unless you feel like cleaning her blood up off the floor.”

He chuckled again. “At least you would be entertained for a while,” he countered.

“Just forget it,” I said. “I don’t know why I thought you would care anyway.”

He sighed again as he leaned back into his chair. “It’s not that I don’t care, princess. It’s for your safety as well as my peace of mind.”

I turned to him in confusion. “Peace of mind?”

“You know you haven’t earned my trust yet.”

I scoffed. "That's why I said someone in your inner circle. Someone you could trust with me."

"You should know my trusted circle is very, very small. I don't have a lot of room for trust in my line of work. Or my life, for that matter."

"Is that why you won't even let Anya and Irina talk to me? Why you chose to kill Holly instead of keeping her around for me?"

He nodded. "The less attachments, the better."

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm still lonely, Darren." He almost allowed a reaction to surface on his face. "Look, I know this sounds stupid, but I'm still starving for human interaction. I do the same thing every day with little deviation. I speak to no one but you and occasionally Clive and Owen, and no offense, but none of you are capable of holding enjoyable conversations with me. I can't even talk to you about the things I like talking about."

"Things like what? What can't you talk to me about?"

I almost laughed at him. "Maybe things like Barbies and periods," I sneered.

He rolled his eyes. "You mean pointless conversations."

"Sometimes those are the best kind."

Darren's eyes glared at me, the rest of his facial features remaining passive as he studied me.

"And Camaro? Is she of such little significance to you?"

I scoffed, watching as Camaro began to dig up the grass where her toy had been. I really did love having a dog. Camaro was a great companion, and she did make me feel a little less lonely, but she still wasn't human.

I shook my head and answered. "Camaro is just another utility to you. And she is a Band-Aid for me."

"You would consider her companionship unnecessary then?"

"I would consider her companionship a *farce*," I said bitterly to him. "You cannot replace human interaction with a dog and call it good."

Darren sighed in annoyance again as he brought his fingertips to his temples and rubbed in circles. "You're frustrating, you know that? You wanted to continue training—I allowed it. You longed to see snow for Christmas—I took you to Alaska. You needed companionship—I got you a dog. Some might see that as being ungrateful."

I clenched my fists so hard I thought my knuckles were going to burst through my skin.

I let out a long, slow breath to keep myself from lashing out at him because I knew exactly where that would land me if I did—right over his knee.

“And you say I’m frustrating,” I replied cautiously.

“You need to learn to be happy with what you have, Jaden. Others do not have it as easy as you do.”

“Oh, I have it easy, do I?”

“Extremely. You should be thankful I allow you to even sit on the fucking furniture.”

That had me bursting up from my seat in absolute rage. Darren remained unfazed as I scowled down at him, my fists tightening at my sides. Eventually, I turned away to begin pacing in front of him across the patio, his eyes following my every move.

“You said if I wanted something all I had to do was ask,” I seethed as my eyes followed my path.

“Yes. I said you could ask. I did not say you would always receive.”

I blew a loud, angry breath from my mouth. Of course, he would twist his own words.

“You said I would be happy.”

“And the conditions of your happiness are what?”

I scoffed. “Your happiness is a one-way street. That’s hardly fair.”

“And what have I repeatedly told you about fair?”

“Stop making me answer my own questions!” I snapped, stopping mid-stride to glare at him. Darren was not impressed.

“Come here,” he ordered sternly, his fingers pointing at his lap.

I dug my heels into the ground and pointed my finger at him. “Nuh-uh. No way! You are not going to punish me for being honest with you. You asked me a question, and I told you the truth!”

“There is a difference between being honest and being disrespectful. You need to learn this. Now, get your little disobedient ass over here now.”

I didn’t move, unable to cope with the fact that I had once again let my anger get the best of me.

“Jaden, if I have to get out of this chair to come and get you, you are going to be very, very sorry.”

“Why can’t you just listen to me for once!?” I shouted at him, feeling my resolve slipping. “You never care about how I feel or what I need! It’s only ever about you!”

“And you think this is the way to get me to listen to you?”

“You don’t seem to respond to anything else I do! It doesn’t matter if I’m good or bad, I NEVER get what I want! I’m just stuck here waiting for you to make the next decision over my life, and it’s bullshit!”

“Get. Over. Here. Now,” he demanded, his voice sharp and dangerous.

“I am not a fucking child, Darren,” I snarled.

Darren rose from his seat, and I felt my heart clench. “But you certainly love acting like one,” he growled and then he was on me.

I moved back and dodged his grip, avoiding his advances as best I could. We bantered back and forth several times, my strikes and kicks blocked by his long arms while I countered his attacks. Even though I was much stronger than before, I still could not best Darren. He’d only been playing with me. He liked it when I fought him, and I had to admit, I was in the mood for another fight.

I eventually felt the side of my face slam into the glass table, Darren’s large hand pressing into the back of my neck as he held me down.

“You’ve gotten better,” he commented, his approval evident. I gritted my teeth. I had nothing to say to him. “I do miss these little rounds between us.”

I could feel his hand lifting up the back of my skirt to expose my bare ass, followed by the first of many very hard strikes.

“Since we’re finally getting a little honesty,” he said, gripping my ass cheeks too tightly for comfort. “let’s purge the inevitable. What did Dominic’s date tell you at the baby shower?”

I felt fear instantly solidify in my gut. No. No, not this.

“What are you talking about?” I tested. He responded with the hardest slap against my ass yet, making me groan as I ground my teeth together, pain electrifying my entire backside.

“Think carefully before you lie to me, princess,” he threatened, his tone accusing and dark. It made my heart burst into overdrive.

“I was just being polite, Darren. She didn’t seem to know anyone. Same as me.” My voice was not convincing. It held too much terror and insecurities.

“So that explains why you tried to refrain from eye contact with each other? Why you kept your lips still and your voices quiet so no one could hear you?”

Goddamn him. He noticed way too much.

“What sort of information did she tell you?”

Ah, fuck! And here comes the official backfire.

I shook my head and tried to play it off, ignoring the pain still flaring in my ass.

“Just that she was from Las Vegas and keeping Dominic company. Nothing of great significance. Our conversation was interrupted before I even got her name.”

I was then instantly flipped over on to my back, and my throat caught in the tight grip of Darren’s hand. His gaze was menacing, his jaw clenched, and his eyes dark with fury. I thought my heart was going to stop just so it wouldn’t be noticed by him. But of course, as usual, my pussy was begging to be noticed.

“Lie to me again, Jaden.” His voice was so deep I almost didn’t recognize it. I felt myself trembling under him as his grip slowly began to tighten, my hands reaching around the wrist that held me of their own volition. “What else did she say?”

Ah, fuck. I didn’t want to give the poor girl away, giving up information she probably shouldn’t have been delivering. I wondered if it was better to lie and suffer Darren’s consequences than throw her under the bus. At least I knew I would live through mine. But the longer I thought about it, the tighter Darren’s grip became.

“She asked me if I was with you,” I croaked out against the pressure. “She knew who you were.”

“And what did you tell her?” he asked, his face now passive, but the death in his eyes remained. I was seriously struggling for breath now as tears began to well at the corners of my eyes.

“I said ‘yes.’”

His grip loosened slightly. “What else?”

I stole a quick gasp of breath before answering. “She was sold the same way I was.”

He turned his head and scowled. He wanted more info than that. His grip tightened again when I hesitated, causing a new gush of heat to pool between my legs.

“She works at the underground clubs of Vegas. She does what she’s told,” I gasped out.

“Evidently not,” he replied.

"That's all," I bit out quickly. I could feel all the blood rushing in my face, my lungs bursting with need. "Please, Darren."

"Please, what?" he asked with a sneer.

"Don't. Hurt. Her." Each word was a breathless struggle.

He tilted his head to the side and smirked, squeezing even harder and sending little electric jolts to my clit.

"I plan to do the exact opposite of that."

I felt myself crumble inside. Not a lot of people know what it's like to be choked, but it's far less than pleasant. The eyes water, pressure builds in the head, eyes, and chest, and awful gurgling sounds croak from your mouth. I didn't know what suddenly came over me, but the urge to fight returned ten-fold. I wasn't going to lay there and let him choke me out anymore. Not when I could still do something about it.

I lifted my legs faster than I thought possible, the top of my left foot instantly pressing into the back of Darren's neck, while the bottom of my right foot pressed into the front of his neck, effectively choking him with my feet.

He seemed momentarily surprised at first, a flicker of pride flashing across his face, but it was gone in an instant as he found his airways quickly compromised. I expected harsh retribution from him, but instead, he just chuckled and reached between my legs. Shock overcame me as he easily bypassed the G-string thong and plunged his two fingers into my wet pussy.

I gasped so loud it could have easily been mistaken as a scream. He stroked me exactly the way my pussy craved it, knowing full well how badly my body wanted it. I fought to contain the pressure at his throat, fighting the tremors in my legs as he massaged every waking inch of my core, all the while strengthening the grip around my throat to the point where my oxygen supply wasn't just lacking, it was completely cut off.

My hands went for his thumb, the one pressing against the side of my neck, hoping to pull it back and out of its locked place, but my hands wouldn't seem to work. I couldn't focus on anything aside from what he was doing to my very eager, very greedy, and very moronic pussy. My legs were turning into jelly as they held him in place. My grip loosened, and even though I had him in a very decent choke, he was still able to withstand it as if he could do it all day. I hated him.

And before I knew it, I was fucking coming and losing control of everything. My orgasm lasted three seconds before my legs finally gave

out, giving Darren the opportunity to escape my choke and flip me on to my stomach. He was inside me before my first breath.

I sucked in air like a fucking vacuum, unable to get enough. Darren pounding into me from behind only slightly distracted me. I bit down on my lip until I tasted blood, doing everything I could to keep my moans to myself, but Darren wasn't having any of that. He gripped my hair and pulled my head back off the table.

"I don't know what's suddenly gotten into you, but you should know better than this," he said, his voice calm and terrifying. "I told you a long time ago I was done concerning myself with every one of your petty little needs. You haven't earned my respect for those just yet, so keep that in mind the next time you want to make an argument about feelings and pointless friendships. I've sheltered you, fed you, protected and provided for you, yet you still have the nerve to expect more from me like some entitled little brat."

I struggled against the glass of the table, wanting to push myself up, but Darren wasn't letting me. His hand struck my ass so hard I couldn't help but tense up. Each strike was excruciating, burning my skin while my nails clawed the table. I couldn't form words, couldn't summon an ounce of physical control over my body, since my only capability was getting fucked. And I hated how goddamn good it felt.

"You're fucking soaked, Jaden. And it's all for me," he drawled in my ear.

Darren fucked me in earnest, hard and punishing, just the way I liked it. I moaned as my nails grated against the glass table, my lungs gasping for air in the awkward position he had me.

"You're mine, little girl. Every privilege I give you is a gift, not a right. And it can all be easily taken away. You need to remember that. Do you understand me?"

I was going to come. I was going to fucking come all over again, right there, just like that.

"Oh, fuck, yes!" I moaned in complete ecstasy as my orgasm lit my body on fire.

"Fuck," Darren groaned, his thrusts becoming shorter and harder as he gripped my hips and emptied himself into me.

Unable to hold myself up, I collapsed onto the table, my heavy breath fogging up the glass. Before I had a chance to calm down from the high,

Darren took my hips and flipped me over on to my back. He then yanked the roots of my hair, lifting my head up.

“The next time you feel the need to lie to me or complain to me about what you don’t have or what you think you need, I’ll remind you of why you should be grateful for what it is you do have. Got it?”

“Yes, Darren,” I whispered, my mouth now dryer than a desert.

“There are plenty of other things I could do to keep you easily preoccupied. One of them would only take about eight months,” he sneered.

My heart instantly slammed into my stomach. No. No, no, no...

I could not handle the idea of being forced to have his fucking kids. Not this early in the game. Not when I still had time to destroy him before he officially destroyed me.

My eyes went wide, pleading with him to withdraw his threat, my head daring to shake slightly from side to side. He caught my plea.

“Then be a good girl and do as I say,” he said as he pulled back and righted himself. “Now, I have a business trip tonight. I’ll be gone for about three days. You’re to remain inside until I return. Maybe that will teach you some appreciation for my generosity.”

Darren gripped my hair again and pulled me away from the table to stand.

“Now, kiss me goodbye properly,” he ordered. And I did, just the way I was supposed to, loving and hating the feel of his lips against mine, and somehow still wanting more. When he was done, my lips were swollen, and my breath officially gone. “Be a good girl while I’m gone,” he said, kissed my temple, and then left.

The three days Darren was gone were spent in more boredom than I thought possible. Not being able to go outside was the worst, especially since the sun was out in full blaze every day. I hadn't thought about how much it would suck for Camaro too since she was now officially trapped in here with me. At least Owen was nice enough to take her outside so she could go to the bathroom since I wasn't allowed to take her out.

I was still kicking myself for that argument. I could have approached it at least ten ways better, but instead, I let my anger get the best of me, and I lashed out at him. I needed to regain my self-control, and this was certainly a harsh lesson to learn that. I didn't even know what to expect from him, what solution he was going to provide me for my need to communicate with others, but obviously, I had gotten my answer.

His threat to impregnate me tripled my anxiety for days. I didn't know how I would be able to escape him while carrying his child. What would be worse was would I be able to leave that child behind if it came to that? I really didn't want to be forced into a position where I would have to choose between my life or the life of my child. I wanted my children to grow up in a loving and happy family, not one built on crime and violence. I would not see my children grow up the way Darren's mother had.

Even when Darren did come back, I avoided him like the plague, and he still refused to let me out of the house. Bastard. I couldn't even sit on my balcony to feel the wind on my face. I was going stir-crazy in that house, but I tried to keep it to myself as best I could.

“Stop sulking,” Darren had said to me as I rolled over in his bed, waiting for sleep to claim me.

“I am not sulking,” I replied into the pillow, wincing my eyes shut as I felt him move behind me.

His big hand reached around my ribcage and pulled me back so I was lying face up, facing him right above me.

“I know sulking when I see it, princess,” he commented.

“You still haven’t let me out of the house.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Here we go again with answering my own questions.

“Nobody but mine. I know,” I answered, sighing in defeat. “I just don’t know how to communicate with you anymore.”

“You have to learn to let go of your anger and accept what is,” he said sincerely, like that was somehow the answer to all my problems. “That’s what gets you in trouble with me.”

“So much easier said than done,” I replied, shaking my head.

“Control is a difficult thing to master, especially when it goes against your basic instincts. But I have a feeling one day you will eventually learn to stop poking the bear.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. I don’t know where I found it, but I suddenly found the courage to literally poke him in the chest. “But the problem is sometimes the bear likes to be poked.”

Darren exhaled, his big chest rising and lowering as his fingers trailed through my hair in an almost soothing manner.

“I enjoy the fight in you,” he said softly “Almost too much. But I also love it when you submit. You’ve officially created a new thrill for me, princess. I love to conquer, and with you, I get to do that every day, over and over, and it never gets old. Your strength is intoxicating the air I breathe, and it seems I have become addicted to it. And the only way I know how to get my fix is to get you to push me. Which is very easy, by the way.”

I released the breath I had been holding as I contemplated his explanation. “So in other words, you enjoy being my schoolyard bully.”

“Is that how you see me? As a bully?”

“All you do is take, and I’m supposed to expect nothing in return. I spend most of my days just lying in wait, waiting for the next decision to be made about my life, and it’s killing me inside.”

Darren scowled down at me.

“You’re not consistent enough with your behavior to warrant more freedom, Jaden. One minute, you’re good, and the next, you’re either pouting or lashing out, and it will do you no favors.”

“I am a restless spirit, Darren. Captivity does not suit me,” I bit out.

“This attitude doesn’t suit you,” he growled. “And I am tired of the same argument. If you want to wallow in your own misery, that is your choice, but you will not subject me to it.”

Darren then got off me to his side of the bed, and I immediately rolled over away from him.

“No, maybe I’ll just drown you in it instead,” I mumbled under my breath.

He swatted my ass so hard my whole backside ached.

“Ah!” I shouted and curled into myself, pain now radiating around my ass.

“Not another word,” he threatened. “Now, go to sleep.”

And I tried; I tried so fucking hard to throw myself into the abyss, but sleep would not come to me for another three hours. I barely moved, focusing on keeping my breathing deep and slow as if I were asleep so that Darren would just leave me the fuck alone.

When I did wake up the next morning, it was because something was licking my face. I squinted my heavy eyelids open to see Camaro sitting on the bed, her little pink tongue hanging out of her mouth as she waited for me to wake.

“You’re not supposed to be on the bed,” I grumbled to her in my scratchy sleepy voice. Darren didn’t allow Camaro on any of the furniture, and she was even lucky he let her in his room. She was useless as a guard dog while still being a puppy, but he wanted her to get used to being everywhere I was. Camaro gave me her little puppy squeal and patted the bed with her little paws. “No. Go back to bed,” I told her and then rolled back over onto the other side of my pillow only for my face to meet a piece of paper.

I squinted again and snatched it out from under my cheek. Another note from Darren.

- Darren

“Maybe later,” I mumble and closed my eyes as I burrowed deeper into the pillow. But Camaro was persistent as she jumped and pawed at my back, and all I could do was groan. I looked over at the clock and realized it was 8:15 in the morning. I had to get up, but I had no desire to even move. Contemplating if it was worth the punishment of sleeping in, I decided against it and rolled out of bed to head to my room.

The second I left Darren’s room, Clive and Owen were already on my heels, waiting for me outside his bedroom door. I ignored them and headed straight to my bathroom to wake myself up while Camaro chewed on my bathroom floor mat. I showered and dressed and had breakfast alone downstairs. I boxed and trained for two hours undisturbed and worked with Camaro’s trainer for the following hour. She was getting better and better at following basic commands.

When she was full-grown, she would start her guard dog training, and I was honestly a little excited about that. Maybe I could get Camaro to instinctively rip out Darren’s throat, hoping that might absolve me of the blame for his death. But I doubted it.

After lunch, Clive and Owen not so subtly ushered me into my studio art room to paint as Darren had requested. But I had nothing “nice” to paint him, and I didn’t feel like getting my hands dirty for once. Instead, I just stared out the window for a long while, twirling the paintbrush between my fingers, watching the ocean and wishing it was warm enough to go swimming... or that I was allowed to at least be outside to hear it. And then I was suddenly struck with inspiration.

Dragging my easel and chair to the other side of the room, I faced the window and painted the beautiful scene in front of me. Mimicking the form of the waves and color of the water and sky, the picture became my mirror. And then I ruined it by painting long black jail bars over the entire canvas, sending a clear-cut message to Darren. I left it there to dry and returned to my room for a long and well-deserved nap before dinner.

But when I woke up a few hours later, I felt a presence hovering and immediately jolted in my bed. Darren was sitting on my bed watching me, a stoic expression on his face. I quickly glanced down at my watch to make

sure I hadn't overslept, but it was a half hour until dinner still. What was he doing here?

When he made no move to answer my internal question, I just glared at him and pulled the sheet up over my head to ignore him and go back to sleep, but he promptly ripped it away from me.

"Get your ass out of bed," he ordered, clearly irritated. I groaned into my pillow.

"So I can do what instead?" I griped as I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

Darren's hand shot out to grip my hair and yanked me forward.

"So you can stop pissing me off," he growled.

I didn't know what made me do it, but from this position, leaning forward with my feet now digging into the mattress, I felt compelled to do something I hadn't done in a long time.

I launched myself at him.

The force of my lunge was enough to get him on his back, though I didn't sense much physical resistance from him. I hovered over him, my hair falling down one side as I regarded him with a dangerous smile.

"Am I awake enough for you now?" I asked and then bent down to kiss him. I was rough and punishing with my kisses, wanting to give him the edge he always gave me. Sparks of lust ruptured around us almost instantly as Darren's hands burned down my body, his tongue invading my mouth while my hands dug into his chest. He met me with his own aggression, possessing every inch of me, and igniting that familiar, delicious heat in my core.

"I like you when you're feisty," he said between kisses, his fingertips pressing into my hips. "Pathetic does not suit you."

I pressed my teeth lightly down on his lip in warning. "And I like you when you're quiet," I replied boldly.

He chuckled and rolled us onto my back.

It didn't take long before he was fucking me deep and hard into the mattress, my legs over his shoulders and crossing at the ankles. If I closed them a little tighter, I could choke him out from that position, but that was just fantasy talking dirty to me again.

"Oh, fuck," I moaned as he changed his position to allow him to go deeper. He gripped my hair and held me tightly as he pounded into me, my body taking every inch of him.

And then I was coming as if my life depended on it.

When Darren finished with me, he pulled out and looked closely at me. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and sighed.

“I want to take you somewhere tonight. It might change your perspective on things.”

“Where?” I asked.

“You’ll find out when we get there. We’ll leave in a half hour,” he said and got up.

I laid on my side and watched him, wondering if he would disclose more information.

“Don’t shower,” he said, righting his belt. “I want you smelling like me.”

I furrowed my brows but didn’t argue.

“Wear something impressive. No panties. And no fucking flats.”

This time, I raised my brows. “Planning on showing me off?”

Darren leaned down over me and kissed my lips. “That’s not difficult to do,” he drawled with a smirk. “Now, go get ready. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

With that, he left me, and I hopped off the bed and headed for the bathroom, while Camaro followed at my heels. If Darren didn’t want me to shower, then fine, I wouldn’t shower, but I wasn’t walking around with his cum dripping down my legs.

Once I’d finished cleaning up, I touched up my hair and makeup and then ventured into my walk-in to find something impressive. I selected a skin-tight cream white satin dress with black accents that stopped at my knees. After deciding on a pair of strappy black and white pumps, I made my way over to the door where Clive and Owen were waiting outside to escort me downstairs.

“Be a good girl, Camaro,” I said to her before shutting the door. She didn’t need to be locked in her crate anymore. The staff would watch her and take her outside if she needed.

When we got to the foyer, Darren still wasn’t there, so I sat down in the chair and waited. I crossed my legs and bounced my foot in the air impatiently. Once again, I didn’t know where we were going, and it made me anxious and nervous. I hated that feeling. I waited for a little over five minutes before Darren finally emerged, his eyes capturing my still sitting position.

I stood up and did a quick spin.

“Impressed?” I asked, raising my brow. I know I cleaned up well.

“Always,” he said, his eyes intense with lust. “But I just have one finishing touch.”

He pulled out a small black velvet box from inside his jacket pocket and opened it for me. My eyes lit up with more sparkle than I could imagine. Inside the box was a silver-chained necklace with a single pear cut diamond pendant. The damn thing had to be at least eight carats.

“Wow,” I said with a gasp, instead of the “holy shit” my mind wanted me to say.

“Turn around and lift your hair,” he ordered.

I turned on my heels and did as he asked, lifting my hair to allow him to place the pendant around my neck. It felt heavy and cold as it rested right in the middle of my chest.

“Thank you,” I said as I turned around.

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s go.”

Taking my hand, he led me out to the circle drive and opened the door to his Ferrari for me to climb inside. I watched from the rearview window as Clive and Owen got into the idling black BMW behind us. Since it looked like they were the only ones tagging along for the ride, I assumed we were going to another place Darren trusted. It made me feel a little better.

As Darren pulled away from the estate, the anxiety began to pick up again. I still had no idea where we were going or what was in store, and it just felt too necessary to know. Finally, I found my voice.

“Anything particularly special I should know about tonight?” I asked.

He released a sigh through his nose as he concentrated on the road, clearly conflicted about answering me.

“You’re likely going to be upset at first, but you’ll quickly get over it if you want the night to continue.”

I regarded him closely. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Do you remember my friend, Matt? I introduced you to him at—”

“At your brother’s baby shower. Yes, I remember,” I said quickly.

Darren clenched his jaw at my interruption, and I quickly looked down at my lap in apology.

“We’re going to his house for dinner.”

“Okay. What could possibly cause me to be upset there?”

A ghost of a smile fell over his lips, and it had me all types of concerned.

“Matt recently acquired a slave from one of my auctions. His rules for her are much stricter than mine are for you, and since you’re so fond of complaining about your life, I thought it would be educational for you to experience hers.”

Son of a bitch.

I couldn’t stop myself from scowling. What a fucking prick. He would try to pull something like this. I knew I had to admit that my life compared to some others was probably better. Darren did keep me in a nice house, kept me well fed and cared for, expensive clothes, shoes, and jewelry, the ability to wander outside, a dog; I certainly was a pampered slave. But that still didn’t make any of it okay. Even if he did take care of me, at the end of the day, I was still a fucking prisoner.

But then something in Darren’s words caught my attention.

“Wait a minute. What do you mean by ‘experience hers’?”

“You’re going to abide by Matt rules tonight.”

I felt my eyes bulge out of my head. “What? What if they conflict with yours?”

“They won’t. He and I have already discussed it.”

“What kind of rules?”

“You’ll see. Just do exactly as she does. Don’t say a word. Don’t complain. And do not fucking push me. Make one wrong move, and you’ll spend a week in that cage, got it?”

I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw hurt.

“Yes, Darren,” I said solemnly, folded my arms and shrank into the passenger seat, not even bothering to focus on anything as I stared out the window. This was going to fucking suck.

When we eventually pulled up to a black gate, it opened almost immediately, allowing Darren and Clive and Owen to pull into an even bigger circle drive than the one at the estate. Looking out the window at the house, I had to force myself to stop from gaping. It was a big white colonial with giant white pillars at the door and big open windows.

Once we had parked, Darren got out of the car and came around to open the door to my side, taking my hand and helping me out while Clive and Owen rounded the car.

“There is one more thing you need to be aware of,” Darren said, a glimmer of warning shining in his eyes. “You need to stay within twenty feet of me if you want to remain within your designated perimeter. Understand?”

Fuck, I’d almost forgotten about that fucking shock collar around my throat. He hadn’t threatened to use it against me since Alaska. I did not want to experience the pain of that in front of company.

“I understand,” I said, trying hard not to sound nervous. I was suddenly terrified I was going to fuck this up.

“Good. Just be on your best behavior, do as you’re told, and relax, okay? You have nothing to fear tonight so long as you can do that.”

“Okay.” I breathed, nodding my head.

Darren then dipped down and kissed me, wrapping his arms around my waist and holding me tightly. His kiss made me forget about the impending evening, and I was grateful for the small distraction that ended too soon.

Releasing me, he took my hand and stepped out of my line of sight so I could take in the beauty of the house that stood before me, Clive and Owen following at our backs. It was just as big and magnificent as Darren’s was, besides the colonial architecture.

I held Darren’s hand tightly, sure enough that I would cut off circulation, but he just gripped my hand back, giving me a reassuring tug. He rang the doorbell as we waited on the front porch before a young man in a light blue dress shirt and khakis answered the door.

“Mr. Davis”—he smiled warmly—“good to see you again.” His dark hair accented his dark eyes, and he looked to be of an American Asian descent. No accent, though. He glanced at me briefly, but then took another look for a second too long. I felt Darren tense beside me, but as quickly as it came, it was gone.

“Charles.” Darren nodded darkly.

“Please come in,” Charles said as he stepped aside, holding the door open for us. “Mr. Rainer is in the dining room.”

“Thank you.” Darren dismissed him and led us through the house. The house was decorated beautifully with lots of art, and I found it difficult to keep my eyes off the walls as my heels clicked away on the marble floor beneath us. There was a wide staircase off to the right in the foyer, and we bypassed that to head deeper into the back of the house, turning to the right

and into the dining room. Clive and Owen took up post just outside the entranceway.

Redwoods, creams, and burgundies exquisitely decorated the dining room. There was a grand chandelier hanging above the long redwood table, a cabinet of fine China and crystal against the wall, and a large bay window, giving access to the woodsy scenery of the backyard.

Sitting at the table was the same man I had met at Daniel and Katherine's baby shower. Matthew Rainer. I made sure to pay close attention to him. With them being such good friends, I was shocked I'd never seen him at the house before.

"Right on time," he said as he got up and shook Darren's hand, a friendly smile on his face.

"As always," Darren said.

"Miss Wilder, it's nice to see you again," Matt said, giving me a small nod.

"You as well," I replied curtly, hoping that wasn't against the rules. Wasn't it usually speak when spoken to and as little as possible?

"Shall we?" Matt said, gesturing toward the dining room.

Darren led me into the dining room, but as we got closure to the table, I noticed there were only two place settings and a cushion on the floor next to one of the chairs. I felt my heart skip a beat with rage as I realized who the damn cushion was for. Darren confirmed my anger when he stood by the chair and pointed at the floor, eyeing me with that challenging look of his. My lips formed a tight line as I sunk my teeth into my tongue to force myself from verbally lashing out. This was bullshit, and he was totally going to hear about it later.

Begrudgingly, I lowered myself to the pillow, glaring at Darren the whole way down and sat back on my heels. He wore a smug little smile on his face as he unbuttoned his jacket and took his seat in the chair next to me. He was so getting the cold shoulder tonight. I couldn't believe he was going to let me be degraded like this. Just because this asshole treated his women like this didn't mean I had to be subjected to it. I could see the lesson in humility and Darren's gracious generosity. He might be a self-serving, sadistic, killer crime lord, but at least he let me sit at the fucking dinner table.

Point made.

Darren and Matt began to engage in conversation, mostly about football for some reason, and I had no interest in paying attention to that shit. It was quickly forgotten when I looked across the way from under the table and saw a young blonde kneeling on a similar cushion next to Matt. His poor little slave. But my eyes nearly bulged out of my head while my heart stopped in its tracks when I suddenly recognized the blonde. Kayla.

Holy fuck, she was alive! She was alive, and she was right in front of me, looking right back at me as if she were looking at a ghost. I forced myself to quiet the strangled noise that nearly left my mouth as I leaned forward. My body reached for her, but the heavy palm that shot down to grip my shoulders abruptly stopped me.

My head snapped up to Darren to be met with a serious scowl, and a slow shake of his head, a reminder that I was not to move or speak without his permission and fucking that up would mean days in that fucking cage again. And I was not going back there. But I couldn't stop my eyes from burning with rage as I realized that Darren had known the entire time where Kayla was and he never told me. Never cared to share that his best friend was her new owner. I felt murder in my veins. But instead of acting out, I released a slow, heavy breath and calmed my shit.

I felt my stomach knot up as I tried to catch my breath while relief and terror came crumbling down my spine. I kept myself very still and just concentrated on Kayla's face, hoping to God she was okay, but if this Matthew Rainer was anything like Darren, I knew she wasn't.

"Are you okay?" I mouthed quietly to her, hoping she could see my movements under the table.

She gave me a sad smile and just blinked. She was obviously terrified to move.

As dinner was served, I wondered if Kayla and I would be eating at all, but at this point, I wasn't interested in food. I wanted to crawl across the floor and hug her until she was nothing but crushed bits in my arms. That was when Darren tapped my shoulder, and I looked up at him with my stupidly sad doughy eyes. I couldn't contain them.

"Open your mouth," he ordered, ignoring my small sign of distress. And then I realized he held a fork with a small piece of meat on it. Reluctantly, I opened my mouth, and he placed the fork inside. I wrapped my lips around the meat and chewed. It was a pot roast, and the meat melted against my

tongue as I swallowed. I looked over to see that Kayla was receiving the same treatment.

Throughout the entire dinner, Darren continued to feed me until he was satisfied I had enough, which was much more than I was capable. By the time dinner was done, I had thought I would burst. I found it difficult to concentrate on their conversation with my only interest being Kayla.

From what I could tell, they reminisced about old times. Apparently, they had been friends since they were kids. They discussed sports, Daniel's upcoming firstborn, and a recent hunting trip Matt went on. That was it; nothing really worthy of me listening to, and I had a feeling Darren had previously discussed appropriate dinner conversations while I was present. Not a word of business. Clever motherfucker.

And then, I suddenly felt it. The small pressure in my sinuses that threatened to make an entrance in a room that was unwelcomed.

I had to sneeze.

I held it back as best I could, fighting the tickle with every ounce of strength I possessed, but eventually, it came out. With more control than I thought possible, I somehow managed to make it sound like the cutest sneeze anyone on the planet had ever made.

The conversation went quiet after my sneeze, and I shrank into myself, hoping I had not drawn too much attention. I dared an apologetic look up at Darren, and to my surprise, he gave me the most tender smile as if that was the most adorable thing he had ever heard. Thank God.

He reached his hand down to the side of my face and drew my head to rest on his thigh, petting my hair before returning to his conversation. It actually felt nice to rest on something, so I just relaxed against him.

I also found it difficult not to squirm on the floor as the pressure in my legs was becoming unbearable. I was not used to sitting like this for such a long period of time while Kayla, on the other hand, was perfectly still, almost seeming comfortable. I felt awful that she was obviously used to this. Bastard.

Once dinner was over, Darren helped me to my feet, and Matt did the same with Kayla. The four of us walked into a parlor across from the dining room, and Darren and Matt sat down on a long couch, while Kayla sat on her heels at Matt's feet. Darren pulled me to sit between his legs where he began to play with my hair.

"What are you drinking tonight?" Matt asked as he stepped toward the bar.

"Scotch," Darren answered.

Matt began to pour the drink into a glass when he suddenly stopped and looked up.

"Ya know what? I have an idea," he said. "Let's let the ladies enjoy the fresh air in the backyard. We'll be able to watch them from the window there, and we can talk business."

Darren's hand then wrapped around my hair and gave it a slight slow tug. "Sure, why not," he finally said and released me.

"Kayla." Matt nodded to her. She gracefully rose to her feet and stood just ahead of where I was still sitting, waiting for me.

"Go," Darren said, nudging me upward. I stood and took a single step before Darren stopped me. He pulled out his phone, pressed some buttons, and then put it away. "Okay, a hundred feet, Jaden. Understand?"

"Yes, Darren," I said and headed off with Kayla, excitement jittering in my nerves with every step, even as Clive and Owen moved to follow us.

When we were finally out the door and partially sheltered from Darren and Matt's eyes, Kayla and I embraced each other in a long tight hug, tears coming down our faces like a much-needed rainstorm. My heart felt like it was going to explode with relief, knowing she was right there in front of me, breathing and whole, and that I hadn't lost her. A small piece of hope found its way into the crevices of my cracked heart.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Kayla mumbled, her voice strained as she rested her chin against my shoulder, her arms still wrapped tightly around me.

"I told you I'd find you, didn't I?" I said, my voice becoming optimistic.

We pulled away to examine the other, our eyes both searching for signs of distress or physical harm.

"Are you okay? Has he hurt you?" I asked her.

Kayla responded with another sad smile. "I'm... I'm okay," she said hesitantly. "I'm just so glad you're here."

"Me too. I pushed Darren for your whereabouts months ago, but he refused to share anything."

She shrugged. "It's okay. I'm not surprised. I am surprised either of them allowed this, though," she said, gesturing between the two of us.

“Well, we should make the best of it while we still can,” I said, slinging my arm over her shoulder and ushering her to the edge of the wooden porch and away from the listening ears of my bodyguards. We sat down on the steps of the porch and huddled close, leaning against the other for more than just physical support.

“How are you? Really?” I asked her.

“I’m... I’m fine. Really. I just try to take things one day at a time, try to keep him as happy as I can.”

“So he does hurt you...” I accused.

She pursed her lips together and turned away. “Only if I don’t listen to him. But... I’m getting better at it. I’m just glad to be alive.”

“Me too,” I said, pressing my lips together and turning my eyes to the sky. The sun was beginning to set, spreading warm neon colors across the clouds.

“So *he* purchased you, huh? Saved the best for last?” Kayla asked, her voice turning light.

“Yeah, I won Murphy’s lottery that day.”

“I’m not surprised,” she added. “I had a feeling it would be him.”

“Yeah, so much for getting the old fuck I was hoping I could kill and escape from.”

“You don’t think that’s possible with him?”

I bit my lip, wondering how much I should divulge.

“This one is a tough safe to crack,” I said with a sigh. “It’s going to take more than I’m capable of.”

Kayla bowed her with a nod, sadness taking her over. I knew I was her last hope in this. If I couldn’t escape Darren, then she likely didn’t have high chances of escaping her fate with Rainer.

“I escaped him once,” I admitted softly, looking toward the clouds. “Started a fire outside of my bedroom window as a distraction and took off on one of his motorcycles while he was out of town.”

Kayla’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, Jaden! That’s incredible! I knew you were a badass. But... obviously, it didn’t go so well.”

“No, not really. This thing has a GPS tracker in it so he can always find me,” I said, gesturing to the collar around my throat. “Not to mention it’s a fucking shock collar.”

“What a sadistic bastard,” she said angrily. “How did you bypass that?”

“Rubber shoe sole around my neck,” I said with a small laugh.

“Ha, good thinking.”

“I don’t see any restriction around your throat. That’s good,” I commented.

She shook her head. “I don’t give Matt much trouble, and he has eyes everywhere. Plus, you’re not the only one with a tracker. I’ve got a GPS chip in my skin, too.”

“Gotta keep track of your merchandise,” I said sarcastically.

“Yeah, I guess,” she said with a smile.

“So what’s he like? What do you know about him?”

Kayla took a deep breath before releasing it through her nose.

“He does business with weapons. That’s about all I know. He’s gone a lot because of it, which is nice. I feel like I can finally breathe then, so it’s not as bad as I thought it would be. He’s just very... strict.”

“Strict how? Darren brought me here so I could experience the life of someone less fortunate than me. Is that true?”

Kayla bit her lower lip like she was struggling with her answer.

“It doesn’t look like you’re even allowed on the damn furniture.”

“Only on special occasions,” she said sadly. Her voice shook as she continued. “I sleep in a luxury dog bed, and if I fuck him well enough and he’s in the mood, only then am I allowed to sleep in his bed.”

“Jesus.”

Kayla seemed like she was struggling to swallow. “This is the most clothing I’ve worn in months,” she said, plucking at her little black dress. “Normally, if I’m lucky, I get to wear lacy lingerie with crotchless panties, thigh-high stockings, and heels. Otherwise, I wear nothing at all.”

Fucking hell.

“I’m locked away in Matt’s suite all day, and I don’t get to go out unless he lets me, which is rare. He said he always wants to come home to his slave in his room. It’s where I belong, he says.”

“Motherfucker,” I muttered under my breath.

“But it’s not all bad,” she said with a shrug. “Sometimes, he lets me have my morning tea out here on the porch. Sometimes, I get to go on supervised walks around the yard. Those are always nice.”

Like that was an improvement.

“What do you do in his suite all day?” I asked.

“Read,” she said. “He brings me books to read during the day and schools me on them later to make sure I retained what I read.”

“What sort of books?”

“They’re always different. Sometimes, they’re on psychology, sometimes, science or geography. Most of the time they’re sexual but always educational.”

So that was how he kept her mind intact. Had her brain stimulated and distracted from the horrors of her life by reading.

I dared to push further, afraid of what I’d hear.

“And what happens if you’re not able to retain everything?”

“Then I’m punished,” she said softly, shrinking in to herself.

“How does he punish you, Kayla?”

She closed her eyes and turned her head away. “He hurts me. He hurts me badly. If I do anything to upset him, if I’m ever disobedient, he’ll make me scream for the rest of the day. And I’ll spend the rest of the night in my cage until I... beg for his forgiveness.”

Fuck, not a cage, too.

“I tried escaping, too, once. Never again,” she murmured, shaking her head.

God, I wanted to march back into that house and stomp on Rainer’s throat until it was crushed under my heel. Sadistic motherfucker.

“I’m so sorry, Kayla,” I said, placing my hand against her back. I didn’t know what else to do. She sniffled in response.

“So... what’s he like?” she asked me timidly.

I released a breath and curled into myself more than I already was. How to describe Darren Davis?

“He’s...” I started but had trouble voicing the words. “He’s quite honestly my worst nightmare. He’s cruel, sadistic, possessive, and very... very unforgiving.”

Kayla was silent for a moment as she nodded in understanding. “Does he hurt you?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

She nodded in return. “I’m sorry, Jaden. I’m sorry it had to be him.”

I looked down at my lap and felt my chest cave in. “He’s hunting down Jason and my mom and brothers. When I escaped, it was so I could get to a phone to warn them to run because he was coming for them. They got away, but he found the rest of my family. Killed my uncle and is holding the rest of them over my head if I fuck up.”

“What? Why would he feel the need to go after your family?”

I shook my head. “He thought they were holding me back from accepting my life with him. He thought if he severed the connections of my old life, I would move on with the new since I would have nothing left to go back to if I ever got away.”

“That’s so fucked up!”

I nodded. “He’s so fucking diabolical. After I was able to warn Jason to tell my family to disappear, Darren had some girl drugged and burned to be mistaken as my dead body back home. I’ve been declared legally dead, Kayla. They had a funeral for me and everything, and that fucker went! He surrounded himself with my grieving family, and now, he’s having all of them watched. I guess he somehow decided keeping them alive as leverage was him being merciful for me.”

“Oh, my God, Jaden. I’m so sorry. What a fucking asshole.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. It doesn’t matter anyway. He may be scary as fuck, but that’s not going to stop me from killing him.”

Kayla looked up at me as if I’d lost my mind. “You are?”

“One day, yes,” I said confidently. “I just have to bring his entire empire down first.”

“How the hell are you going to do that?”

“One little domino at a time,” I answered.

She smiled. “I knew, after all this, you’d still be tough as nails.”

“What doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger, right? We’re still alive. I’m not going to stop fighting until I’m dead if that’s what it takes.”

“I wish there was something I could do to help you,” Kayla muttered.

“You can,” I answered. “You can stay strong for me. I’ll get us out of this, Kayla. It might take a few years, but I won’t give up. Just don’t let that fuck face allow you to forget who you are.”

Kayla smiled at me, hopeful and alive. “I won’t let you down,” she said.

“Goddamn right,” I affirmed.

Kayla and I continued to talk about our lives since we’d been sold, and it was surprising to find she was pretty much in the same position as I was. Though she didn’t battle with Matt like I did Darren, she still kept up a good defiant attitude for as long as she could take it. Eventually, she had given in to Matt, which was understandable. I didn’t blame her for that. Even I had given in to Darren in some aspects.

When I told her about our fight in Darren’s training room, she laughed and clapped her hands together in obvious amusement. She was proud of

me for standing up to him the way I had, even though I lost in the end. She was excited to know I was still training, making my body better than ever before. I didn't tell her about the island or how I'd gotten there, but I did let her in on the adventure in Alaska and the wolf pack that almost ate me. She'd nearly lost her shit when I showed her the scars.

She was beyond envious when I told her about Camaro, but she had said she was the only pet in the house as far as Rainer was concerned. It felt good to hear from her; it felt good to hear anything from her. Even if it wasn't the best news, even if she was obviously uncomfortable with the amount of talking we were engaging in, I was just glad she was all right. I was happy to finally be interacting with another person other than Darren, and it was a woman no less. My subconscious was practically singing itself back to health. Genuine laughter did wonders for my mental state.

"Do you ever think about them?" Kayla finally asked me. I knew exactly who she was talking about but didn't want to acknowledge it.

"I try not to," I said. "But I'll see them again. I'm just not sure when."

"I hope you're right."

"It's going to be okay, Kayla. One way or another, I'm going to fix this. Somehow..."

"Don't get yourself killed, Jaden," she warned. "If something happens to you..."

I scoffed. "There are other things worse than death, Kayla. Besides, don't you know who you're talking to? I'm indestructible." I gave her a smile hoping to ease her nerves, but even she could see I was talking out of my ass. Now that I knew of Kayla and where she was, I felt more fragile than ever. Darren had officially added a new toy to the box that he could easily take away from me.

Some few minutes later, I felt a chill rise up my back as the door behind us opened, and I could feel Darren's eyes on me before I even turned around. He and Matt were standing right behind us.

"Time to go," Darren said.

I nodded and stood with Kayla. We gave each other a quick hug, eyes locking for one final moment as if this could be our last moment together—and for all I knew, it very well could be. Matt could kill her tomorrow if he wanted, and Darren could refuse to allow me to see her again. Pain erupted in my chest as I walked away from her to Darren's side. His large hand

pressed into the small of my back, leading me out of the house and back to the car.

Something was off about his demeanor. He seemed tense, cold, and frankly, pissed off. I wondered if something had gone wrong between him and Matt? When we were on the road, my warning flags were in full mast as the little hairs on my arm stood on edge. Darren's knuckles were white as his gripped the steering wheel, his jaw clenched shut, while his breathing remained slow and even. He was definitely pissed about something but was holding it back. It was freaking me out, and I had no idea how to dissolve the anger coming off his body like steam.

To be honest, I was pretty pissed myself. He knew all this time where Kayla was and who she was with, and he never told me. Of course, he would feel that information was privileged, but he had to have known how important she was to me. I wanted to berate him for withholding her from me, but instead, I bit back my pride and did something else that made me shake with rage.

“Thank you for letting me see Kayla,” I said softly through gritted teeth.

Darren didn’t say a word, just clutched the steering wheel tighter. Fuck, something was up, and it was making me panic inside. Had I done something to upset him? I was a perfect fucking angel in there, eating out of his hand like a little fucking bird, and he thought he could be the one to be pissed off? With his brooding and my own, the tension in the car was so palpable I swore it fogged the car.

When we finally pulled up in front of the house, I tore out of the vehicle before he even shut the damn thing off and headed toward the house. I didn’t get very far when I felt my arm gripped way too tightly in his hand and yanking me back.

“What the fuck is your problem?!?” I shouted at him.

His response was to slap his hand against my mouth and lower jaw and squeeze. Pain buzzed in my jaw where he had first cracked it so long ago, and I couldn’t help but release a muffled scream, not wanting to go back there. My eyes pled with him to stop, my free hand gripping and pulling at his wrist, but the scowl on his face showed no signs of concern.

“This fucking mouth of yours,” he growled. “That is my goddamn problem.”

Darren then released my face and practically dragged me to the house, nearly flinging me through the front door. I whirled around to face him, and

immediately kicked my heels off, lowering myself another few inches, but at least, I would be more stable. We were going to fight. I could feel it.

“Darren, what’s going on? Why are you acting like this?”

He shook his head at me, those eyes so dark and dangerous, and it only made me quiver inside, heat flourishing all over my body. He took another step toward me, and I couldn’t stop myself from retreating slightly, my knees bending and my feet light for quick movement. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and my blood rushed so fast it was making me dizzy.

“I probably should have mentioned something about that pendant of yours,” he said low and steady, taking several slow steps toward me. “One specific little detail...”

He was even closer now, his body heat clouding around me as he towered over me, a menacing glare smeared all over his gorgeous face. He was fucking terrifying me because I knew he was going to say the one thing that was going to destroy everything.

“It records.”

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Cornered, trapped, and terrified. I had Jaden exactly where I wanted her, and she was fucking shaking with fear. On the outside, I was fucking furious but still in control, and on the inside, my rage was eating me alive. I'd heard every word she'd shared with Kayla, and it was everything I needed to hear, needed to confirm that her head was still wrapped around the wrong objective. After everything I'd just done for her, after all the time I'd spent pampering and pleasuring her, my warrior princess was still planning to betray me, and I just simply couldn't have that. Even if she had no idea where to start or how to accomplish a single thing against me, the simple fact that the idea was even there in the first place was enough to put me into action.

It didn't matter how well I did or didn't treat her, didn't matter how lavish or hellish I could make her life, the amount of times I'd threatened her family, or the number of people I'd already killed to keep her as mine, she was still out for my blood. The only thing stopping her was that she wouldn't be able to get away with it if she did. She still refused to accept her life and still intended to betray my trust and that was the undoing moment.

I wanted to be able to trust Jaden more than anything. I wanted to feel her reach for me at night, whether she was scared, wet, or just needed to feel me. I wanted to create the dependency that she had created in me, and I was going to make that happen, starting right fucking now.

Jaden was backed against the staircase, her small frame shivering in the dress I was going to rip to shreds. I traced my fingers along the side of her temple down her face, tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear, relishing in her obvious terror. She knew how much shit she was in, and the question was whether she was going to lie down and take it. She didn't have a choice in it, of course, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping for a fight.

"You're shaking, little girl," I whispered and then tipped her chin up to face me. "Did you really think I wasn't going to find out about your little plan to betray me?"

Tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes, making them big and glassy and beautiful, the fire of her irises drenched in the wetness of her fear, and it was making me hard as fuck.

And then suddenly, her eyes hardened.

"Guess the cat's out of the bag," she said and shoved her palms into my chest.

Catching her wrist before she could make another strike, Jaden countered with her legs, but she didn't have enough room for a decent kick. And suddenly, it was game on.

Jaden attempted to make every strike she could, but in the end, she just wasn't fast enough. I blocked everything she gave until it was clear she was becoming tired, her body clearly out of practice with combat. And when she was done with her instinct to fight, she would commence to flight, and I would enjoy the shit out of that chase.

When her attacks began to slow, I grabbed her arm and tossed her across the room. She rolled to the floor like the pro she was and then immediately bolted from the room just like I wanted her to. My dick became painfully hard as I chased her down into the next room and took her to the floor, pinning her beneath me, her back to my front.

"You are such a bad girl," I said as my teeth grazed her ear. "Your worst nightmare? I hope I live up to that tonight."

Jaden screamed in rage, struggling underneath me, sobbing and clawing at the floor until I gripped her wrists to hold them in place.

"You knew! You asshole, you fucking knew where she was all this time, and you never told me! I fucking hate you! Get off me!"

I shook my head at her, gritting my teeth. "And you knew I wasn't going to tell you. It's none of your business, Jaden. Get over it."

“Do you have to be such an asshole all the time?! Can’t you see how miserable I am?”

I brought my hand up and yanked her head back by her hair, causing her to gasp. “And how would you compare your misery to Kayla’s? I treat you like a goddamn queen in comparison to how he treats her, like she a fucking pet. Is that how you want to live, Jaden? Is that what you would prefer?”

More tears fell from her eyes and down her glossy cheeks as she took in my words.

“No,” she whispered with a small sniffle.

“I didn’t think so,” I said, releasing her hair. “Your misery is a result of your own inability to let go and accept what is. You’re the one who makes it hard on yourself, Jaden. *Let go.*”

Jaden rested her forehead against the floor, her hands turning to fists as she silently cried to herself. She quieted eventually, her cries becoming softer, but her body remained just as tense. She stilled beneath me, her heavy breathing slowing while she dug her nails into her own palm.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her temple resting against the floor as tears drained from her eyes.

“Sorry for what? Because you got caught?”

She blinked.

“I’m so stupid,” she barely breathed, and it just made me angrier.

“Allow me to educate you,” I growled and flipped her over.

I was inside her in seconds, ripping her dress to shreds and punishing her with my cock, filling her with my cum while she filled the air with her moans of ecstasy. She was fucking soaking for me, her core burning with liquid heat and calling me home. She might hate me, but she loved the way I took her body over the edge. Every. Single. Time. I could lose myself in her for days, and that was exactly what I planned to do, right after I made my final point.

My hand gripped her throat and pulled her toward me. “Who do you belong to, Jaden?”

She closed her eyes tightly, more tears spilling as she fought to deny the one question that she hated to admit. When she hesitated to answer, I felt my anger seethe again. “Answer me, little girl.”

Jaden made a gasping sound before she finally opened her eyes. “You,” she said on a sob.

Pressing my lips to hers, I rewarded her with tenderness, but only for a brief moment. Easing my grip on her throat, I kissed each one of her tears away, reminding her of what happens when she listens.

“I’ve been so good to you these last few weeks. I’ve given you so much of my time, my love, my affection. Shown you how good I can be to you, but even after all that, you still don’t want it. You’d rather betray me instead.”

Her body shook as more soft cries left her.

“Oh, Jaden. I’m so disappointed.”

“I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered, her beautiful face flushed with the dark shadow of defeat.

“You can. And I’m going to show you how. You’re going to learn what happens to those who betray me. And I’ve got quite the show planned for you, princess.”

“Oh, God,” she breathed, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “No.”

“Oh, yes. Now, let’s go. We don’t want to keep our guest waiting any longer.”

Pulling away from Jaden’s warmth, I righted myself and then lifted her from the floor to bring her to her feet. Fixing her ruined dress, I managed to cover enough of her, and then gripped her arm to tug her out of the house and back toward the shack. That was where the real fun was going to begin, and I couldn’t wait to get started.



Darren dragged me out of the house and out toward that wretched shed while his fucking cum dripped down the inside of my leg. I was grateful my dress was long enough to hide it. Looking toward the shed, I realized hadn’t been back there since the torture of the gardener, and it had me wanting to pull away, but I knew there was no chance he’d allow that. I just hoped whatever poor soul was down there was not someone I knew and by some small miracle actually deserved what was likely about to happen.

Pulling me down the stairs to the basement level, I could hear voices and laughter until several of Darren’s men confirmed them. Scott leaned against the corner of the room while ten of Darren’s guards stood around in a circle, surrounding one man. They fanned out as we entered, making way

for Darren to take command. Some men I recognized, Eric with his missing ears, others from around the estate, and Clive and Owen, who made their way to my side as Darren left me with them.

“You all know why you’re here,” Darren said calmly, entering the circle. “We have a traitor among us.”

The men around him cheered their vulgarity and roared with approval, and it made my stomach churn. The other man he was facing didn’t look as I expected him to look. He was fit, albeit not as tall and built as Darren, but he looked like he could have been one of his guards. Bald head, dark scruff around his face and bloodshot eyes; he looked tired but ready for something. “You all know the rules. No one interferes, and only one person walks away.”

I looked on in confusion, my heart palpitating with fear as I came to the conclusion of what was going on here. “He’s going to fight him?” I asked Owen.

“Yes. And you are to watch every second of it.”

“What if he loses?” I asked.

“He won’t.”

“What if he did?”

“Then he would be dead, and Brian would walk away a free man.”

So, that means he’s obviously never lost. Fuck.

Brian threw the first punch, missing Darren by a mile as he quickly dodged out of the way, a wide smile on his face as he moved. He was going to enjoy this fight, and I had a feeling it was going to end with blood.

They bantered back and forth for a while, Darren blocking and countering strikes efficiently to the point where I was honestly impressed with his speed and technique. Brian was good and held his own for a while, but he was sloppy compared to Darren. Brian was already winded and visibly tired while Darren was light on his feet and clearly had great control of himself and the fight.

“What’s the point of this? So Darren can get his rocks off?”

Clive scoffed.

“Every now and then we all need to be reminded of what happens when you betray the hand that feeds you. Brian stole a shipment from Mr. Davis and sold it to someone else, claiming an adversary had stolen it. He’d also been selling classified information to our rivals. We found out, and now, Brian has to pay.”

“So why not just kill him? Why is there a need to fight him?”

“Mr. Davis allows all his traitors a chance at redemption. If they fight him and win, then they can go free without consequence. He will respect anyone who can best him, and if they can, he would no longer be fit to lead. But no one has ever beaten him.”

“Clearly,” I replied as I watched Darren block a kick from Brian and counter with an elbow to his face.

All hell really broke loose when Darren knocked Brian to the floor with a perfect hit to the nose. Blood poured from Brian’s face as he hit the floor, and Darren did not hesitate to finish him off.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen a fight like this. I’d witnessed plenty of bar fights, finished a few myself, but something with this type of fight was far different. In a bar fight, you typically weren’t trying to kill the other person. Not really. But here, with Darren, his brutality was a clear indication of his intent to not only kill his opponent but also to destroy him.

The sound of facial bones breaking under his fists was enough to make me cringe. More cheers echoed while over and over, Darren plunged his fists into Brian’s face until it was nothing but mush, blood covering Darren’s hands until not an inch of his skin was clean. The men were eating this up as if they loved it. Apparently, they hated traitors just as much as Darren did. Yet Brian was still alive.

He laid there, motionless and barely breathing, but I could still see small movements from his chest even as Darren stood over him. But Darren was clearly not finished.

“Knife,” he said calmly, holding out his bloody open palm.

I felt my stomach immediately twist in two.

“Why does he need a knife...” I asked quietly.

“Watch,” Owen said.

I felt myself inching backward, but the wall behind me in the form of Clive prevented my retreat.

Scott handed Darren a long hunting knife, the serrated steel glinting off the flood lights of the ceiling, and I felt my hands ball into fists. This was not going to be good.

I didn’t know why I cared, though. This man had worked for Darren, had been a part of the evil of his empire, so why I cared what happened to him didn’t make sense to me. Maybe it was just because I didn’t want to see the bloodshed. Maybe I wasn’t ready for the brutality of Darren’s world.

But I obviously didn't have a choice in that as I felt I was being tossed into the deep end of this darkness.

Before I could even register what happened, Darren had plunged the knife into Brian's chest. Brian's screams became a clear indication that he was, in fact, still alive, and it only got worse as I watched Darren drag the knife further down his chest and across his stomach, completely slicing him open.

Blood pooled everywhere, and a sickening dizzy feeling overcame me as I watched Darren carve more and more of Brian away, cutting out his intestines and spilling them onto the cement floor. Brian's screams were so loud I had to cover my ears as I fought not to retch. What made it even worse was the obvious enjoyment on Darren's face as Brian's blood coated him.

When the show was basically over, I felt my back hit the stone wall behind me and slid down, my legs no longer able to hold my weight up. I felt sick, my body shaking with fear as I watched Darren beat the shit out of someone and then gut them alive. I could fucking see Brian's guts protruding from the gashes Darren had made in him. My heart was racing erratically, and my breathing was becoming short. I'd never witness anything so fucking gruesome in my life.

As the cheers died down, Darren stood over his opposition, blood soaking his clothing and covering his hands and face. I barely recognized the monster that stood before me, and it terrified me further as he took the necessary steps to advance toward me. I inched even further into the wall in a stupid attempt to back away from him, but there was nowhere else to go. My hands moved to cover my mouth, my lips curling in on themselves while I forced myself to hold back the tears that threatened to fall.

I was fucking shaking with terror.

Darren crouched low in front of me, his eyes intense with calming rage as he looked at me. This was the result of betrayal. This blood-soaked demon before me. And I never wanted to fucking see it again.

"Do you understand now what happens to those who betray my trust?" he asked me, his voice calm and low.

I nodded my head, unable to find the words to answer him.

"Good girl. Now, you're going to crawl into my arms, and you're not going to let go until I tell you to, understand?"

I nodded again automatically, even though I wanted to be as far away from him as humanly possible.

Darren stretched his arms out to me, waiting for me to comply with his order. And like the fear-stricken fool I was, I did just that. Biting my lower lip, I crouched forward onto my hands and knees before tentatively wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing myself into his blood-soaked chest. Soft panicked cries left my mouth as I felt the blood seep into my torn dress, coating me in Darren's cruelty.

He wrapped his arms around my body protectively, pressing me tightly against him while he lifted us from the floor. I couldn't have clutched him tighter. I didn't understand it, but the tighter I held onto him, the more he would know I wanted him to shield me from what I just saw. Even though I knew he was the one responsible, the one who caused the anxiety flowing through my limbs, he was also the one who could easily take it all away. In one singular moment, he could effortlessly switch from my tormentor to my savior, and right now, I desperately wanted my savior, and I needed him to know that.

“Wrap your legs around me.”

I didn't think I even had the strength to lift my knees, but I somehow managed to lock them around his waist and tighten my grip around his neck, my chin pressing into his meaty, bloody shoulder. He didn't say a word as he carried my trembling body up the stairs, abandoning the gruesome and bloody scene behind us. I closed my eyes to avoid having to see it again.

For the first time ever, I'd actually witnessed Darren murder someone. I knew he had killed others, heard about it and listened to it, but I'd never actually seen him do it, and it was fucking horrifying. The joy displayed on his face as he took that life was sickening and disturbing, the blood dripping from his face a clear reminder of what he was capable of.

The conversation we'd had in the car when we first came back to the estate flashed in my head. How he planned to have me match him in every way. Could I become a killer like him? Find enjoyment in the destruction of others the way he did? I might have a strong vendetta for vengeance, but death was necessary in it and not something to be pleasurable. Would I find pleasure in murdering those who worked for Darren? Anyone who did business with him was an enemy, and I could not afford to be prejudice against anyone. They would all have to go, and I didn't have the time or the

room for remorse in that plan. I would have to be just as brutal as the man holding me. And the fear of what I would become after all of this was over was more terrifying than anything else was.

And I had already begun to see those changes, hadn't I? I'd already successfully manipulated the death of one and attempted two more without a shred of remorse, but it was entirely different when I finally witnessed the result of such actions. Especially when they were as gruesomely displayed as that.

Darren clearly meant tonight's display as a punishment. It was a warning for what was to come should I ever betray Darren, but I doubted he would ever subject me to such a beating again. In fact, it was probably a good thing he had shown me such violence. I needed to get used to it; I needed to be able to look past the blood and gore and see the real goal: annihilation.

But holy fuck, it was going to be a long, hard road before I would be able to handle that kind of shit. I didn't doubt I could put a bullet in someone's head but to carve them up was something entirely different. The only thing that worried me the most was that next time I was caught in the idea of betrayal, I might recognize Darren's opponent standing in the ring... because it could be someone I love.

I couldn't allow that. I couldn't afford to be so careless again. I couldn't give voice to those thoughts ever again. To breathe them would be my ruin.

I suddenly felt water hit my back, warm water spraying on my bare skin and torn clothing, and it made me jolt. Where were we?

"Shhh," Darren cooed, stroking my hair back as he held us under a showerhead.

"How did we...?" I asked, letting the question linger as I tried to remember how we had gotten here. I'd been so lost in my thoughts I didn't even realize where Darren had taken us.

Setting me on my feet, the sticky blood between us pulling at my clothes and skin, Darren removed my ruined dress as well as his own clothes and moved us deeper under the spray of the shower. I didn't recognize the shower stall, so we weren't in his room or mine. I had no idea where we were or why we weren't in either of our own showers, but the thought didn't linger long as I watched the blood begin to slide down Darren's chest and circle around the drain. I felt compelled to help clean him.

Moving my hands to his shoulders, I became determined to help push the crimson away from his skin, pressing it down with the water to make more and more of it disappear. I wanted it gone, and I wanted him clean because then I could pretend he was a little less evil.

“Jaden, stop,” Darren said, but I barely registered the words as I moved to grab a bar of soap.

“I said stop it,” he snapped, grabbing my wrists to prevent me from washing him.

“Let go,” I pleaded, attempting to pull away and getting nowhere.

“Look at me,” he growled, and my eyes instantly snapped up to his. “You’re trying to wash away your fear. I assure you, it’s not going anywhere. This is me, Jaden. This is who I am. My skin is stained with more blood than you could ever hope to wash away. It’s a part of me, and no amount of soap is going to change that.”

I looked away, my eyes falling to the floor to watch little streams of red and pink flow between us, swirling around the drain. And then I remembered that very same blood covered me.

Ignoring his words, I moved under the center of the spray, tilting my head back, so the water fell over my face and coated my hair. But then I was abruptly yanked away from it.

“It coats you, too,” he said into my ear, his lips teasing my skin as he spoke to me. “There’s no running from that. One day, you’ll be inside that ring destroying my enemies, and I have a feeling you’re going to enjoy it just as much as I do.”

I tried to jerk myself away from him, seething anger from his words. Because he was right; I probably would enjoy it but not in the same way he did. He would enjoy the bloodshed, whereas I would only enjoy the fact one less person would be on his side. Yes, I would have to kill, but that did not mean I had to maim and mutilate to accomplish anything. I would not become a heartless monster like him. I was better than that, goddammit.

“I will *not* become like you.”

Darren’s face turned sinister, his lips forming into a dark smile as his eyes narrowed in on me. “You’re already closer than you think.”

I jerked again. “You’re wrong. I’m not like you because I’m better than you are. I see right past your manipulative bullshit. You’ll shower me with hearts and flowers and then bathe me in blood. I will not let you ruin me.”

A soft chuckle left Darren's throat, and it had me seething with anger and fear. I wanted to shrink away and punch him in the face at the same time. How could he make me feel this way so systematically?

"Oh, my sweet little Jaden. You have no idea how much I plan to ruin you."

Before I knew what was happening, my back hit the wall of the shower, my hips suddenly lifted, only to be impaled right onto Darren's rigid cock. I cried out from pain and pleasure, my walls sealing around him in anguished welcome. My nails dug into his shoulders as he pumped into me, his hands digging into my hair to pull my head back and expose my neck. His teeth found my sensitive flesh, biting and sucking until I was moaning for more.

"And I've got news for you, princess. You will not be leaving this room until you're good and ruined to my satisfaction."

A harsh gasp tore from my throat as Darren gripped my neck and held tight, too tightly as he thrust even harder into me. The reality of what he was planning had me panicking inside, and as my oxygen supply faded, so did my grip on his shoulders. I tried to push away from him, but with my back against the wall and the wall of a man fucking me in front of me, I had nowhere to go. I fought against him, gasping for air when none would come while he fucked me ruthlessly. He was going to choke me out for real this time, and there wasn't shit I could do about it.

"Darren... please," I groaned, and just when I thought I was about to pass out, he released my throat. The first gasp of air I took had nothing on the orgasm that swiftly followed. It was the most unreal thing I had ever experienced, my entire body melting with pleasure so strong it flowed through every vein, creating a moan from my lips even I didn't recognize. I could feel Darren's cum coating my walls as he finished, his satisfied grunts confirming as much. I felt myself go limp in his arms, my chin resting on his shoulder while my arms hung lifelessly down his back. And then it was lights out.

51

LAST RESORT



Jaden went limp in my arms just like I wanted her to. I didn't feel like dealing with her struggle right then. After rinsing her and myself off, I pulled us from the shower and quickly towed her dry just enough to collect the stray droplets of water from her skin. After laying her down on the bed in my little basement dungeon, I grabbed my phone and activated the electromagnetic coil I had installed in the metal bedframe, the magnetic field strong enough to keep Jaden's cuffed wrists attached to the metal headboard. When she woke up, she was not going to be happy.

I decided to allow her body some time to rest and changed into a pair of black sweat pants and sat down in the chair next to the bed. Jaden was going to need the rest after the shit I was about to put her through.

I was done with this idea that she was going to beat me. That she was going to bring down my empire and escape me. The thought alone had me laughing inside at her adorable naivety. She had no idea the depths of my world and how far it stretched. It might as well run as far as the gates of Hell since I'd sent so many there already. She had no idea the distance I'd go, the things I would do, the number of bodies I would stack to keep her mine. I'd become so damn obsessed it was like a toxin, poisoning my mind, my heart, and even my cock. She was my drug, and it infuriated me how easily I'd become her junkie. It almost made me hate her for creating such a weakness for me.

I'd catch myself thinking about her in the middle of a gun fight, zero concern for the bullets blazing past me in the dead of night while I took comfort in the fact that I knew she was safe and sound, tucked away within the confines of my fortress and sleeping peacefully in my bed. Even when I'd gone to Vegas to visit Dom for three days, I still couldn't get her out of my head. I watched him discipline Dalia for her loose mouth and yet barely paid any attention to it, too concerned with Jaden and her request for friendships. I'd actually almost considered it.

After all the shit I dealt with just to try to keep her happy, she still thought to betray me. She still thought her loyalty belonged to her vendetta. She was dead fucking wrong about that. I owned her, and that fierce possession meant owning everything that she was. Her hopes, her dreams, her fears, and her faith all belonged to me, and I would uphold that custody with an iron fist.

I headed over to the thermostat and lowered the temperature even more than I usually kept it. I was going to make Jaden desperate for me, and forcing her to need my body heat would compel her to accept me for comfort. I'd tried to take the easy route with her, tried to give her a simple way to accept her life with me, and now, it was clear I was going to have to revert to the extreme measures I had hoped to avoid. I was going to use her own body against her until her mind accepted how much she truly needed me. I was going to force the dependency until it pained her to be away from my touch, from my love.

I didn't care how long it took. We would be down here for months if that was what it meant. Until I saw the truth in Jaden's eyes that she honestly and wholeheartedly believed that she was mine forever, that displeasing me was a personal failure, and that her plan for revenge was hopeless and unwarranted, she would never leave this room. I was done playing games. It was finally time for a real breakdown.

When Jaden finally stirred a half hour later, I felt excitement rise up again. Soft panicked gasps left her throat as she struggled against her restraints. She needed to get used to them. They'd be in place for a while.

When she realized she was getting nowhere, her eyes finally found mine as I remained relaxed in my chair with an open book in my lap.

"W-what are you doing?" she asked, her voice laced with uncertainty as her naked body began to shiver from the cold.

I glared at her and closed the book on my lap, placing it on the nightstand as I stood up.

“Waiting for you to wake up,” I replied.

“Waiting for me to w-wake up like t-this,” she said, tugging against her restraints again. “It’s fucking f-freezing in here.” I could see the goose bumps rising on her skin as her limbs shook to keep warm. It put a smile on my face.

“You’ll be waking up like this for a while. How long will depend entirely on you.”

“What are you t-talking about?”

“Who do you belong to, Jaden?”

She looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. Like I was stupid for not knowing this answer.

“You,” she said, her eyebrows narrowing.

“And what else belongs to me?” I asked her, my arms folding across my bare chest as I regarded her.

Her confusion was evident as her eyes searched me for the answer.

“I... I don’t...”

I knew she was struggling with what I wanted her to say. She knew exactly what else belonged to me, but she didn’t want to say it. She could admit that her body belonged to me, but that was nothing compared to her mind, heart, and soul. And I’ll be damned if they weren’t in my pocket before I let her leave this room. Sunlight would not touch her beautiful skin until she gave me what I wanted.

“I’ll give you a hint,” I said. “It starts with the letter L.”

Fear had sparked in Jaden’s eyes before she shielded them from me, her lids closing tight over the amber I refused to be denied. Her body shook even more as she fought back the sobs I knew she wanted to release. And I welcomed them. I wanted her tears to coat my skin. I wanted her to shed them so she could move past her initial fears and give in to what was always meant to be. Mine.

Lowering myself to the bed, I placed my hands on either side of her head and leaned in.

“I may not have your love, and though that will come in time, it is not my immediate concern. My immediate concern is your lack of *loyalty* to the man who owns you. Treachery is not something I will tolerate as you’ve seen tonight, and you are no exception.”

More silent tearless sobs racked her body as she tugged at her cuffs. I found myself pressing my lips to her forehead.

“We will be going back to the drawing board, Jaden. You will not leave this room until you’ve abandoned your hopes for revenge, and I am satisfied with your behavior. You will remain here until you understand that your loyalty to me is the only thing that will release you from everything you’re going to endure down here.”

More silent sobs, more shaking, and this time, the tears finally flowed. We were already making progress.

“I hope you’re ready, princess. Because I have a feeling we’re going to be down here for a very long time.”

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It took Jaden a full month and a half before she finally broke. She spent the first week sleeping in her cage, and the second week—when she behaved better—completely restrained to the bed; her only reprieve was when I allowed her to use the bathroom or to bathe. If she behaved, I would only cuff her wrists together while I warmed her body with my own, massaging the blood flow back into her arms.

For every ounce of reluctance or mere glimmer of ungratefulness, I responded with that much more cruelty. If she wanted my mercy, she'd better damn well smile for it and show me how much it meant to her; otherwise, I had no reason to give it. If I didn't feel her desperation for me, then I wasn't working hard enough to extract it. For every small moment she denied me, whether it was defiance or false indifference, I punished her severely. Pain was a constant companion for her for a long time. I didn't care if she was denying an orgasm or an emotion, I would not have her hiding a thing from me.

The first few days had been difficult. Her first week was filled with nothing but punishments. I'd burned her with wax, whipped her with leather, beaten her with wood, and drained every single tear and scream from her body. For every word of backtalk, I made sure she tasted blood in her mouth. It didn't take long for her pride to leave her as she begged and pleaded with me to stop. It wasn't happening. If she wasn't restrained to the bed, she was restrained somewhere else within the room, submitting to the pain she knew she owed.

At first, she had fought me in her restraints as best she could as I left her legs to move freely, but that was only because I wanted to be able to move them in different positions when I fucked her. I threatened to numb her legs with anesthetic if she kicked me, and I only had to follow through once on the second day. She was much more cooperative after that.

On the days when she did finally give in to me—when she gave me what I wanted and took her punishments well—the pleasure I rewarded her with was far greater than anything she'd ever experienced. I was tender, gentle, passionate—everything she could have ever wanted or needed as she grew dependent on my comfort. If she denied me, I made sure to leave her wanting for the rest of the night. If she thought she was lonely and isolated before, she had no idea how reliant she was about to become on my attention and affection alone.

Eventually, her pride disappeared altogether, and she made sure to express her gratefulness to me at every turn. The feeling I got when she clung to me, seeking a shield from the cold her body endured in my absence, was heaven. She'd bury her face in my chest, and as she warmed her little nose, she'd inadvertently warm my dead heart.

After the third week, I let her roam the room freely, but the moment I entered that door, she had less than three seconds to get down on her knees and show me the respect I deserved. Down here, I was her fucking Master, and if I had to treat her like the slave she had been back at the warehouse to get her to understand her place, then so be it. If she disobeyed me even once, she returned to her cage. After two weeks of strict confinement, she only risked that punishment once. There were no more attempts of intentionally displeasing me after that.

I made sure she depended on me for everything. I woke her, bathed her, warmed her, read to her, clothed her if she was good, fed her, punished her, pleasured her, and put her to sleep. I cared for her every need. She wasn't allowed to do anything on her own without my permission, except relieve herself, and if she did, there was trouble for her.

Again, in the beginning, she would experiment with her freedom, and again, she would lose it. It was a pattern with her. She'd behave well up until I tested her with more responsibility. She'd always fuck it up, thinking she could outsmart me; thinking I wouldn't see when she tried to manipulate me into sympathizing with her.

Eventually, she learned to stop trying, to take what I gave her in stride until she finally came to terms with what her ultimate goal was: to please me. By the fourth week, pleasing me motivated everything she did, but I didn't want her motivation simply to be to get out of the room. I wanted her to please me because it pleased her to do so. I wanted her to make me happy because she wanted to, not because she had to. But that conditioning would be the result of Stockholm syndrome, and we simply weren't there yet.

When I moved to leave her, the panic in her voice had me smiling on the inside. She didn't like it when I left her alone, but she didn't realize how important her isolation was. I learned the most from her when she was alone, watching to see if she would fall into old routines or practices. After Jaden's first week of being able to roam freely, she trained. She'd exercise until her face was beet red—shadowboxing, advanced kicks, running in place, push-ups, sit-ups, crunches, planks, yoga, everything she could do to not only stay in shape but also to stay warm. When she wasn't exercising, she'd meditate or stretch. It wasn't as if I gave her much to do in there. But after a few weeks, her behavior began to change. Each day, she engaged in a little less training; there was less rage in her shadowboxing, and her kicks lacked their usual flair.

Some days, she wouldn't train at all and spent hours crying into the pillows. She was losing hope, and though it broke my heart to see her in such pain, I knew it was necessary. She was beginning to see her training as pointless, and she was slowly starting to give up. She'd spend more time either curled in a ball on the bed, her small fingers tracing over my name on her wrists, or pacing the room while her eyes watched the door anxiously. She was waiting for me—waiting for me to free her from her isolated torment. But she would not be free because of pity or for my overwhelming desire to have her at my side again. I had a goal that I needed to accomplish, and if I stopped now, I feared the whole process would be ruined, and I'd have to start completely over.

When I did eventually go to her, the happiness that flashed on her face made me smile. I wanted her to look at me like that forever. But just as I left, her smile would fade, and she would curl back into a depressing state of loneliness. I wanted to bring her back to the light so badly, but I wasn't sure if she was ready. I needed to find out for sure.

When I walked into the room in the morning, Jaden was still asleep in the bed, curled up on her side and facing the door. She looked so sweet and

innocent in her sleep; my redhead angel that I was going to twist into a new demon.

Gently sitting on the bed, I tucked the stray hair that fell over her face behind her ear. The slight motion was enough to make her stir.

“Wake up, princess,” I whispered, my hand lovingly caressing her face.

Her lids slowly lifted just enough to reveal the beautiful amber behind them. A sleepy smile graced her lips as she moved her head into my lap, nudging her face against my thigh. Warmth flooded my chest at her reaction to me, and I rewarded her by running my fingers through the soft strands of her hair. She allowed a quiet moan of pleasure to leave her throat, practically purring in my lap like a sexy little kitten. I continued to stroke her hair for only a few more seconds before I finally gripped her roots tightly and held firm, sending a wave of shock over Jaden’s body.

“Time for breakfast,” I drawled, and she knew exactly what that meant.

Without a single second of hesitation, Jaden moved to pull down the zipper of my pants. She released my painfully hard cock from its confines only for it to become buried in the back of her throat. She bobbed her head and sucked hard just the way I liked until my self-control met its match. I gripped the sides of her head and fucked her mouth like the savage I was until my cum was shooting down her throat. And she swallowed it all as if she were starving for it.

When I was satisfied, I pushed Jaden’s naked body back against the bed and pried her legs apart. My tongue was inside her in seconds, lapping and sucking at my own breakfast while her taste drove me insane. She was already soaking wet for me.

Jaden’s back arched, her hands digging into the sheets as soft moans of pleasure left her mouth. My hands trailed up her hips, smoothing over her soft stomach until they were clutching at her breasts, pinching and teasing her nipples and causing her to twitch under my tongue.

“Oh, God, Darren... please... let me come,” she groaned. If she asked, and I was happy, I’d give her what she wanted.

“Come,” I ordered her, sucking her clit into my mouth and creating that painful pleasure she loved so much.

My name left her lips in a cry of ecstasy, and it did things to me I could never explain. It made my ego soar, knowing I could bring her body to such heights.

“Look at me,” I said, and her eyes immediately found mine.

As I climbed up her body, her eyes never left mine, even as I sunk deep into her liquid heat, filling her up entirely. Her body arched under me, a soft moan leaving her lips, while her hands moved up and down my arms.

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

“I belong to you,” she said instantly, but it wasn’t just the fact she said it. It was the way she said it. I could always taste the disdain in her voice when she said those words—the reluctance and blatant annoyance when I forced her to say it—but now, as I was buried deep inside her, she said it with passion, like she was finally happy to be mine. And hell if that didn’t have me fucking her like I owned her.

I decided to let Jaden out of the room a week later, ready to release my little hellcat from her conditioned captivity into her old habitat. She’d woken up that morning in my arms in my bed where she belonged. She’d been so grateful for her release that she’d cried in my arms, pleading with me never to send her back down there again. She would be good; she would make me happy as best she could. She would do anything.

I’d never felt more victorious in my life.

Though I worried this was still all a trick, that she was manipulating me again and being the best damn actress on the planet. Only time would tell, which was why Sid watched her every second of every day, especially when she was alone. I wanted him to assess everything she did. I wanted to know if it was real as I felt it was.

When Clive and Owen came back to assume their positions, she barely even looked at them, barely even smiled at Camaro. I had Clive and Owen training with her dog on advanced combative commands while Jaden was away. For a puppy, she was doing very well.

Daniel and Katherine had their baby girl a few weeks prior, and I wondered if taking Jaden to see the baby would entice her motherly instincts, but I thought better of it, considering her fragile state. In all the years I’d regrettably known Katherine, I’d never seen her look happier than when she was looking down at Ella, sleeping peacefully in her arms. It surprised me when my chest started to ache, and I realized I wanted that with Jaden. Not now with her so fragile, but within the next few years, after we were married and happy.

For the next few weeks, I spent as much time with Jaden as possible, which was difficult to do with everything going on. I discovered my traitor had not been alone in his schemes, and I was still hunting for his partner as

shipments were still either getting hit or coming up missing. It was pissing me off, especially because it took me away from Jaden.

Jaden was still sad when I left her, and sadder still when she was alone. Even though she was back to exercising in the gym, she still didn't technically train. She didn't even look at the punching bags anymore. She either ran on the treadmill or practiced yoga. She barely played with Camaro, only taking her for walks or occasionally petting her. Her paintings held no color, mostly blacks and white, sometimes gray. She didn't smile unless I was in the room, not even for Anya and Irina who still maintained her hair, nails, and skin. She barely even looked at them and never said a word. Her head was always down everywhere she went, her hands clasped in front of her. Somehow, in the midst of everything, I'd managed to turn her from a fiery hellcat into a quiet little mouse. And that was when I realized I had finally, successfully broken her.

This was different from last time. Last time, she acted like this to annoy me, but this time, it felt real. She'd lost hope of any escape, the idea of revenge completely obliterated. The only hope she held on to now was for me to make her happy when she made me happy. And though I was enjoying my victory of finally having beaten Jaden into permanent submission, I would not have her remain this way for very long.

I had expected this type of regression. It was phase one in a sense; break her down to nothing and build her back up the way I wanted her. She was certainly broken, and now, I had to re-create the glue that would hold the pieces together. But before I pulled her back into the right direction, I needed to make sure this was real. I needed to make sure she wasn't just fucking with me again to piss me off.

I sat at my desk with my eyes fixated on my computer screen. Jaden fiddled with her hands as she sat on the couch, talking with Sid. I'd hoped this session wouldn't go nearly as bad as the last one had. Although that would determine if she was a liar or not.

"Hello, Jaden," Sid said politely as he sat on the opposite couch in front of her.

"Hi, Sid," Jaden replied, her eyes not making full contact.

"How are you doing?"

Jaden shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Just fine?"

She didn't say a word, just nodded with the tiniest ghost of a smile barely visible. She was doing it to be polite.

"You don't seem fine," Sid commented, leaning in to regard her.

Jaden's eyes widened for a moment like she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"I swear I'm fine," she insisted. "Have I done something wrong?"

Sid shook his head. "No, you're not in trouble. I just want to make sure you really are okay. You look tired. Are you sleeping well?"

She hadn't been. She'd wake up in the middle of the night in a panic, believing she was back in the basement. She'd calm down immediately when she realized she wasn't, but it was still hell getting her back to sleep. I finally had to drug her to get her to sleep through the night.

"Not really," she said.

Sid regarded her closely.

"Bad dreams?"

Jaden looked away toward the floor. "Sometimes."

"They will pass eventually."

"I know," she said with a slight nod.

"You seem to be eating well," Sid said, trying to play on the positive.

That was the only thing I was happy about. She was eating; albeit the portions were smaller, they were always healthy. I decided to compromise a little after everything I had put her through. I couldn't have her throwing everything up again if her anxiety overwhelmed her.

Jaden responded with a small smile. "I know it makes Darren happy when I do."

"What else do you suppose makes Darren happy?"

Jaden sucked on her bottom lip before responding, meeting Sid's gaze. "When I do what he says."

"And what makes you happy?"

"Making him happy."

I felt my heart skip a beat. Good girl.

"Is there anything else that makes you happy?"

"Not really," she said softly, hopelessly.

Not a shocker. The only thing she focused on anymore was me. And that was exactly what I had wanted. The problem was she didn't care about herself, not her mental well-being. I originally needed her focus on me, and now that I had it, it was time to add a subsection: her. I wanted her not only

happy to please me, but I also wanted her to be happy *with* me. I wanted her to enjoy life outside our relationship, but it was clear she wasn't in that mindset. Just because she was with me for the rest of her life didn't mean she had to be unhappy outside of my attention and affection.

After a while, I had tried to goad her, just to see if I could get a rise out of her, but she would never bite. She'd always concede, and I couldn't help but smile and relish in my twisted success. I'd ruined her. Officially fucking ruined her. And now, it was time to fix it. I needed to remind her of who she was and why I had chosen her in the first place.

I needed to really piss her off.

"What about Camaro?" Sid asked.

Jaden shrugged. "She does her job just like everyone else does."

Sid took a deep breath and exhaled before he revealed his analysis. I waited anxiously for him to light the match. "Would you like to know what I see, Jaden? What my observations have led me to? You seem to have a feeling of indifference to your life outside Darren. You don't sleep, we're grateful you eat, but you don't seem to find enjoyment in anything anymore. You don't play with Camaro, you don't paint anything with real color, you don't speak with volume, you walk with your head down, and the most disturbing thing of all is you don't even train anymore. Why, Jaden?"

Jaden shrugged again. "There's just no point in fighting anymore," she said simply.

"No point?" Sid asked incredulously.

"Mention her father," I said into the speaker connected to the earpiece Sid was wearing.

"How do you think your father would feel about that?"

My heart was pounding out of my chest as I watched Jaden's eyes lift to harden slightly, but before I could even focus fully on it, it was gone. Her face back to being passive.

"My father is dead, Sid. He doesn't feel anything."

"Fuck," I whispered under my breath. I was sure that was going to get a rise out of her, but all I got was a small hint of emotion. And it didn't last longer than even a second. Even Sid looked surprised by her remark.

And that was all I needed to know. I had finally won, and now, it was time to mold the marble in my image. My future wife and mother of my children would not be a goddamn mouse like Katherine. The only thing I wanted Jaden to understand was that she was never getting away from me

and to learn to be happy with her life. She appeared to have accepted everything, and that was what was depressing to her.

I had to slowly introduce her back into the world she would eventually rule with me—the world that didn’t allow the survival of mice. I would start with her training. She thought fighting was pointless? Fighting me was pointless, but her skillset was too valuable to permit it to fade. Knowing what she was capable of, how well she could fight? It turned me on. It also gave me a sense of security to know she wouldn’t be completely helpless when surrounded by a threat. Eventually, the threats would come, and I wanted her prepared.

Time to get the ball rolling.

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All I ever tasted anymore was blood. The metallic flavor coated my mouth like a stain I couldn't remove no matter how many times I tried to clean it. But the taste was my reminder. It kept me grounded, cautious, and afraid. I had to stay afraid. It kept me in line, showed me the boundaries that I never wanted to test. And it kept Darren happy—the only thing that mattered anymore.

The things Darren did to me, the words he made me say, the pain he caused, the psychological torture—I'd never snapped in half so hard in my life. I could feel my mind being warped each day, twisted and pulled in so many painful directions that I didn't think it would ever end. For weeks, he made me suffer relentlessly and severely. The smallest transgression was like ringing Hell's doorbell and asking for an invitation for another dose of pain. Nothing could have prepared me for what I went through or how broken I'd become. I was nothing. Less than nothing. I was just his now.

And I thought of nothing else.

But when I found myself drowning in the misery of my despair, the hopelessness of my life, Darren had reached down and dragged me out, breathing a different life back into me. When I was good, when I made him happy, my reward was more than I could have ever expected. He was kind then—gentle, warm, and comforting. Everything I needed him to be.

He chased away the cold with his body, drove back my nightmares with his touch, and dried my tears with his lips. I was consumed with the need to

be comforted, cared for... cherished. And when I was good, when I made him happy, I felt safe. And all I ever wanted after all the pain and anguish I had suffered was to feel safe.

Darren had been my tormentor and my savior. And I had to do everything I could to keep the tormentor at bay and stay with my savior. The one who cherished me as if I was the most precious treasure in the world. That was the key to my survival.

When I was finally released from that room, waking up unrestricted and warm, I'd broken down right in front of him, expressing my full gratitude and relief to be trusted. But what was worse was the realization that I was finally and officially broken; otherwise, Darren wouldn't have released me. He was confident in his conditioning that I was as twisted as he wanted me to be, and my heart broke in two knowing it was true. I was so fucking dependent on him to love me and cherish me that it terrified me. Because he couldn't hurt me if he was loving me. I was safe that way. I could survive that way.

But it was so fucking hard to live that way.

I was so goddamn paranoid that the smallest thing would land me back in that basement, and then I would never be able to leave. I'd die in there if I went back, so I did everything possible to stay out of trouble. I avoided temptation like the plague. I didn't train. I didn't speak unless spoken to. I kept my head down and avoided eye contact unless requested. I ate all of my food no matter how sick it made me and forced myself to keep it down. I kept up my appearance and wore heels around the house. I even tried to cover up the scars of my wolf bite with makeup, so he wouldn't see the defect in my skin and remind me of my stupidity. And I smiled every time I saw Darren because even though I was still petrified of him, I didn't want him to focus on that. I wanted him to see my smile because I knew it made him happy.

The only thing I couldn't do was sleep. I'd try so hard to find the comfort I sought in his arms, his heart beating against my ear and letting me know that everything was okay. That I was okay. But then I'd close my eyes, and all I would see was darkness. All I would feel was cold and lonely confinement. I'd hear my own screams and wake in a panic when Darren held me too tightly. But then I'd realize he wasn't hurting me; he was comforting me, stroking back my hair and kissing my tears away.

His touch always made me feel better. And when he wanted me... God, when he wanted me...

I desperately threw myself into his passion, thriving in his affection, feeding off it like a drug. My need for him became insatiable. I'd often find myself shaking with anticipation and need when he wasn't around. I had to know that he was happy with me. It was the only thing that kept me together. When he was fucking me, I was complete. I was serving my purpose and giving him what he wanted so he would give me what I wanted: security.

I knew I was brainwashed, but the exhaustion of constantly fighting it was too much. I was human after all, and I could only take so much. I wanted it to be over. I wanted to be happy, and maybe if I did accept my life and knew there was no escaping it, maybe there was a chance, if I let myself, I could be happy.

My plan for vengeance was officially gone, obliterated, and replaced by a different need. My goal was to try to salvage what was left of my life, make peace with it, and live as happily as I possibly could. I was still learning how to do that, still adapting, but in the end, I still felt nothing inside. I lived to please, and when Darren wasn't around for me to please him, I felt useless and incomplete and feared he would think I was slipping back into my old views and punish me again. I had a feeling he was worried about me, but I didn't know why. I was never leaving him. I was his. I wanted him. What more was there?

After a lonely lunch one day, I sat in the library for a while to read. Camaro laid at my feet while Clive and Owen sat quietly on the leather chairs not far from me when Darren suddenly walked in. The hardened expression on his face made my stomach twist, his stride too determined to convey a casual visit. But when he stopped before me, his features immediately softened as he looked down at me, and it allowed my heart to quiet once more.

“Reading again?” he asked, his voice lighthearted.

I nodded, trying to give him a small smile. I had been reading a lot lately. It kept me out of trouble.

He crouched down to my eye level and gently took my face in his hands. Their warmth had me leaning in to them, and I couldn't help but show him my appreciation. I found myself admiring the beauty of his face, the treacherous candy coating that hid the evil inside. I wanted to taste the

candy for the rest of my life if it meant I never had to see the evil filling within again. Darren regarded me closely, his eyes peering deep into mine, and I wondered what he was looking for.

“I want you to train with Scott today,” he said.

I furrowed my brows. He hadn’t had me train with Scott since we left the island.

“When?” I asked. Never why. I never asked why.

“Now.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod and closed my book.

Darren stood to allow me room to rise, and I followed him out of the library with Camaro, Clive, and Owen. I quickly changed into some workout clothes in my room and met Scott in the gym. Darren was not present. Scott stood in the middle of the cage with a focus mitt on each hand. He looked just as determined as Darren had been.

Making sure I was well stretched before I started, I sat on the floor in a full split while I wrapped my hands and put on my gloves. I kept my eyes on Scott as he paced the cage like a tiger, waiting for his chance to strike. It didn’t even faze me.

When I was ready a few minutes later, I stepped into the cage feeling absolutely nothing. I was a robot who followed commands, and if Darren wanted me to train with Scott, then I would train with Scott.

Scott gave me a list of complex strike combinations, and I already had them configured in my head. I was able to deliver everything he asked for, putting all my focus and energy into each strike, but it wasn’t for me. It was for him. And for Darren. I was on autopilot, my muscle memory capable of repeating hundreds of combinations without even thinking about them. Scott didn’t stop at striking. He tested the height and speed of my kicks, my chokeholds and takedowns, even my flips and handsprings.

But even though I successfully did everything he asked, he did not seem satisfied. He seemed pissed off, actually.

“Where the fuck are you right now?” he asked, his voice rough and angry.

I jerked my head back in confusion, sweat trickling down the side of my face as my heart continued to beat out of my chest. “Excuse me?”

“Your head. Where’s your head at? Your body might be here, but your head sure as hell ain’t.”

I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows as I focused on calming my breathing. "I don't understand. I did everything you asked," I said.

He shook his head, and tore off the mitts. "Your body did. But you didn't."

I placed my hands on my hips and furrowed my brows, still trying to catch my breath but remained stoic. "Well, I—"

"We're done for the day," he said, completely interrupting me as he headed out of the cage. I watched him walk out of the gym and slam the door behind him.

Shaking my head, I grabbed my boxing gloves from the floor and headed out of the cage while removing my wraps. I didn't know what to make of his reaction. What had I done wrong?

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked Clive and Owen as they took my gear from me.

Clive simply sighed while he set my stuff on the nearby bench, and Owen just shook his head.

"Why did you train with Scott?" Owen asked me.

I almost glared at him. The answer was obvious. "Because Darren told me to."

"And if he hadn't told you to, would you have wanted to?" Clive asked.

I shrugged. "Only if it would have made Darren happy."

"And that's the problem, isn't it? You only do things that make Mr. Davis happy," Owen said. "You need to do things that make you happy as well."

I felt taken aback by that, the inappropriateness of the conversation suddenly weighing on me.

"I don't think we should be having this conversation," I said.

Clive rolled his eyes and began to usher me out of the gym. "Come on. You need a shower, little girl."

I got halfway up the staircase when I suddenly realized I didn't even care that Clive had called me little.

What the fuck had happened to me?



Another month went by with barely any change in Jaden. She still wasn't training on her own, only when I asked. Her muscle tone was disappearing, and she was losing weight in muscle mass. After finally forcing her to train with Scott, he'd never been so disappointed in his life. She was still able to complete every move and keep up, but her drive and power were completely absent. It was like she wasn't even there inside. She was somewhere else.

I was ready to fucking strangle something.

Sid told me he thought she was struggling with PTSD, which explained her lack of emotion, her disdain for her old activities and habits, and her poor sleep and nightmares. The only time she ever smiled was when I was spending time with her, but it just felt wrong, fake, like she wasn't really there, just a part of her.

Even now, with Jaden curled up against my side while we watched the Detroit Red Wings play the Toronto Maple Leaves, there was nothing from her. Zero emotion. It was killing me inside.

I had allowed this concealed misery to linger long enough. I needed to find something that would start the goddamn fire and bring Jaden back to life. I just had to find the one thing that would finally make her snap out of this shadow and rise to rule at my side like the fucking queen she was meant to be.

My phone started to ring just after the Red Wings scored their winning goal, and I answered, knowing I wouldn't have to worry about Jaden listening in anymore. I was almost disappointed by that.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Man, do I have a surprise for you," Scott said on the other line.

"What?" I asked.

"I found our snitch. The last and original snitch. Fucker's been hiding under our nose the whole time."

I felt my blood begin to boil inside. Whoever it was, I was going to fucking rip them apart for the shit they caused me. "Who is it?"

"Come down to the shed and see for yourself. You're going to love this."

"Be down in a minute," I said and hung up. I kissed Jaden's head and then moved to get up. "I've got to handle something."

Jaden's eyes immediately lit up with concern. "Will you be gone long?" she asked. She knew better than to ask where I was going. It was none of her business, but she did know how and when to ask the right questions. At least then, she would know when to expect me.

"Probably," I answered. "Make sure you take your sleep aid in an hour. I expect you to be out when I return." If we'd finally found the last of the traitors, then I was going to make sure this fight lasted a nice long time. It didn't even cross my mind to bring her to this one like I would for the others. I figured maybe, for once, I'd give her a break.

I kissed her softly, brushing her hair behind her ear before grabbing my jacket. Heading out, I found Clive and Owen standing on either side of the door just as they should be.

"Make sure she's asleep in an hour," I said, heading past them.

My heart was racing with anticipation. I wanted to sink my fists into the face of the fucker who'd been causing me so much trouble. I wanted to rip his traitorous tongue out and gut him right down the center until his screams deafened me.

When I made it down to the soundproof shed, Scott greeted me at the bottom of the steps with a wide snake-like grin. He was just as excited about this as I was. About ten more of my closest and most loyal men were scattered around the room, circling the stupid fuck in the middle. When he turned around, I almost did a double take; I couldn't believe who it was.

Jared stood in the middle of the circle, blood dripping from the corner of his lips as he returned a glare at me.

Motherfucker.

I took a few steps forward, rage pumping through my veins as I itched to tear into him.

“Well, this is certainly a surprise,” I said to him as everyone quieting down around us. “I didn’t think you actually had the balls.”

Jared’s head tilted to the side as he regarded me. Several months ago, he could barely look me in the eye, and now, here he was staring me down like he had some kind of chance against me. It was almost comical.

“Took you long enough to figure it out,” he said.

There was going to be so much blood tonight.

I shook my head at him. “I should have just let Jaden kill you all the months ago. You were a piece of shit then, and you’re an even bigger piece of shit now.”

He scoffed. “You should be thanking me. I’m the reason you have her in the first place.”

I laughed. “You think that’s some kind of bargaining chip? How I acquired her doesn’t matter. What does matter is when the men who swear their loyalty to me betray that trust and get their own brothers killed because of it.”

“You do what you gotta do, man. I’m just—” I didn’t give him the chance to finish his sentence. My fist slammed into his jaw and knocked him right to the floor.

“Don’t worry,” I said, taking off my jacket and tossing it the floor. “I am going to do what I’ve gotta to do. And I’m going to fucking enjoy it.”

And then I destroyed him.

Jared couldn’t fight for shit. His position at the warehouse didn’t require him to train, but for fuck’s sake, the man could barely throw a punch. Every attempt he made was slow and easy to dodge. He couldn’t block anything, could barely even lift his hands to protect his face. He only had street fighting experience, and it was shit compared to the advanced training I had. Loud cheers echoed along the walls, reminding me of how much my men enjoyed the carnage. They hated traitors just as much as I did and lived for the violence and retribution.

Honestly, the fight was hardly enjoyable. He wasn’t fighting back. No challenge whatsoever. When Jared was a bloody pulp on the cement floor, I

looked down at him in disgust, ready to reach for my knife and end him. But as I scowled at him, I realized his death just wasn't satisfactory enough.

It couldn't be ignored that if it wasn't for his blatant stupidity and disregard for my orders, Jaden would likely have never crossed my path. He had been the one to bring her to me, turning her entire world upside down. He'd tormented her before she was mine and even had the pleasure of Kayla when I'd given the order. Jaden had almost killed him the time I found her encouraging an escape while she beat his face in with her own fists. He had so much internal bleeding from the stab wound she originally gave him; it was a miracle he had lived at all. I had wondered how she would have felt if she had actually killed him. Would it have made a difference in her demeanor? Would it have changed her personality?

A few months ago, she had successfully gotten me to kill one of my own guards, and almost two more not much longer after that. I knew she could smell the blood in the air, but I wondered if she was ready to taste it. And if she did, would she want more? Vengeance had been the only thing to drive her before, but I was curious. If I supplemented it a little with something else, would that snap her out of this misery she was secretly suffering? If ever there was an opportunity to make her a killer, the opportunity to exact revenge against the real man responsible for her life, this had to be the golden fucking moment. I owed her that much.

This was the moment to finally break Jaden of the damage I caused and light the fire once again. I wanted to begin the next phase of her conditioning and officially welcome her among the wolves. I was ready for the comeback of a lifetime.

"Go get Jaden," I ordered, a sly smile on my face as a small look of confusion swept over Jared's face. "And grab me that chair."



I laid on my side on Darren's bed facing the door, waiting for him to come back even though I knew I would be asleep before he did. Because I was a good girl. I did what I was told when I was told. I didn't question. I didn't complain. If I could be good, I wouldn't disappoint Darren. I wouldn't have to go back to the basement.

Just the thought alone had me nearly bursting into tears.

I sat up from the bed and turned to take my sleep aids when the door opened. My heart skipped a beat, but it was only Clive. Disappointment flooded my heart.

"Miss Jaden, please get dressed to go outside," he said.

I blinked once before immediately getting up to go to the closet to change. Ninety-nine percent of Clive's orders came directly from Darren, so if Clive was asking me to get dressed, it was because Darren told him to. I quickly changed into a knee-length black sundress with three-quarter sleeves and a pair of black flats before hurrying over to the door. I knew Darren didn't like to be kept waiting.

Clive and Owen escorted me downstairs and out toward the patio. I didn't ask where we were going. They wouldn't answer, and I would find out soon enough.

But when we stepped outside and started to make our way over to the shed, I felt my heart rate kick up. Only one thing went on down there; it was bloody and gruesome, and I wanted nothing to do with it. The last time

I was down there had been brutal. I'd witnessed my first murder of what was likely to be many in my future, and still, it haunted me.

I followed Owen down the stairs of the trap door while Clive trailed behind. Below, the same familiar faces filled the room as last time. Scott stood in the corner with a hard glare in his eye while Clive and Owen moved to flank me. When my eyes finally locked on Darren, I felt myself freeze from the look he was giving me. Oh, God, what had I done? Was I in trouble? But then his eyes fell to the man sitting in a chair next to him. He was bruised, bloody, but still breathing for some reason. Why had Darren kept him alive? Did he want me to witness another one of his second-chance murders?

But as I looked into the eyes of the man on death row, I saw something familiar. It was something I didn't want to remember, but my memories refused such a luxury. Emotions I had not felt in the longest time suddenly flooded my body as I came to recognize the face, allowing a voice to play in my head over and over again.

Can't be too careful...

Can't be too careful...

Can't be too careful...

Motherfucking Jared.

Anger like I had never felt before burned through my veins like acid. I felt my lips pull back from my teeth, revealing a scowl bordering on animalistic while my nails bit into the palms of my tightly clenched fists.

Why the fuck was this guy still breathing?

When Jared's eyes finally found mine, the stupid fuck actually started laughing, and it only made me seethe more.

"Hey there, hot stuff. Miss me?" he barely croaked out with a gurgled chuckle.

"Is he your traitor?" I asked Darren, my eyes still on Jared.

"Yes."

"Then why is he still alive?"

"Because I've decided his life is not mine to take. It's yours."

My head instantly snapped to Darren as my mind filled with confusion. Mine? Nothing was mine. Everything was his. Everything.

"What?"

"Come here, Jaden," he ordered and pulled a gun from the side of his hip.

I went to him without hesitation, my heart pounding out of my chest as I found it difficult to swallow. When I was at his side, he slid a magazine holding what looked like one bullet into the gun and held it up. A silencer was attached to the barrel.

“There is now one bullet in the mag. I’m giving you one chance to pull this trigger and put the bullet in Jared’s head. But I want you to understand that I’m not forcing you to do this. You can refuse if you want, and I will allow it this one time. But just know, if you take this gun and you do pull the trigger and end his life, you start walking down an entirely new path, and there is no walking away from that. Ever. Do you understand?”

I was suddenly having a hard time finding my breath. I looked down at the black H&K USP 45 Tactical, and it dawned on me that I actually knew what kind of gun Darren was holding. I knew of its excellent accuracy, the perfection of the craftsmanship, and the fantastic reliability it garnered. I also knew it was a .45-caliber pistol with a threaded barrel to allow the grip of the silencer.

I had never been shy around guns. I grew up around them. My dad hunted and was an avid shooter and proud gun owner. I followed in his footsteps. When you obtained a license to carry concealed, you had a responsibility to educate yourself on that type of weaponry, and I made sure I was a fucking scholar in that area.

I was never afraid of guns. They were nothing to be feared. The only reason to be afraid was when someone had their finger on the trigger and was pointing it at you. But the presence and existence of this particular firearm wasn’t what had me alarmed; it was what the man holding it was offering me to do with it.

Darren was offering me a chance to kill someone, and not just anyone—the man responsible for my life as it was now. The man responsible for taking me from my family for not being able to handle rejection and placing me in a hell I never wanted to acknowledge was real. The man responsible for not only my suffering, but also for my loved ones’ and for countless others I didn’t even know of. The man responsible for raping Kayla in front of my very eyes with a smile of satisfaction on his face as she screamed. A man who had taken part in delivering so much misery to others that I doubted one death for him would be satisfactory.

But even though he was Darren’s traitor, and traitors didn’t survive in Darren’s world, I found it odd. Even though this man was responsible for

my coming into Darren's ownership, he still wanted him dead. If I was to be given the opportunity to kill him, I needed to know why I was the offeree.

"You want me to kill the man responsible for bringing me to you?" I asked. I had to be sure this was what he wanted.

"How you came to me makes no difference. You're mine now, and that's all that matters," he answered definitely.

I looked down at the semi-automatic in his hand and went into consideration again.

"What if I say no?"

"Then you say no, and you go back into the house and ready yourself for bed. You will not be punished, nor will I treat you any differently. Nothing will change."

That was it. Like it made no difference to him if I said no. Life would resume as is.

"And if I say yes?" I asked.

"Then you say yes, and we move on to a new phase in our lives. But *only* if you think you're ready."

Two decisions. But which one would make him happy? Which one would please him the most?

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, hopeful he would tell me exactly what he wanted and expected.

Darren glared at me, his tone harsh and unapologetic. "I want you to make a fucking choice. Make a decision for yourself. You decide, Jaden, not me. Kill him or don't. It makes no difference to me. Jared will die either way. I just thought I'd offer you the right of first refusal."

My eyes went back to the gun he held in his hand. *What do I do?* I didn't want to question his motives any further. I needed to make this decision on my own, and the thought had me conflicted as fuck.

And then the sound of gurgled laughter filled my ears again.

"Come on, Darren. You're really going to let the little pumpkin kill me?" He chuckled, blood coating his yellow teeth. "Surely, you can do better than that."

My eyes turned to him, lit with instant rage at his words. *How. Fucking. Dare. He.*

Soft chuckles and smiles from the men around us surrounded me, and I felt myself coming undone, the stitches that held my restraint together slowly ripping apart from the seams. I wanted to lash out, to fight, to maim,

to full on fucking rage until I was exhausted and satisfied, and as my body shook with fury, it became harder and harder to contain it.

I could feel Darren's eyes on me, his brow raised like he was waiting to see if I would react. If I would take that kind of shit from Jared.

He chuckled again. "Sorry, sweetheart, but I just don't think you have it in you. Leave it to the big boys who can actually pull—"

I didn't allow him to finish his sentence. Instinct took over as I swiftly turned my body into a reverse sidekick and slammed my foot straight into his mouth, knocking him right out of his chair. The moment my foot made contact, the most beautiful sense of fulfillment washed over me. The taste of revenge lingered on the tip of my tongue, its sweetness filling my mouth like honey. I hadn't lost it. It was still there, waiting to be found.

Jared grunted loudly, and I felt myself moving in on him, my clenched fist rising to strike, but Darren grabbed my arm and held me back. Jared was instantly righted back into his chair, coughing up blood and spitting out fragments of his teeth. I didn't think his mouth would be working properly after that. I moved toward him again, my fists shaking to plunge them into his face, but again, Darren held me back.

"Say one more fucking word, and I'll make you swallow the rest of your teeth," I threatened.

Holy fuck, did I just say that? Were those my words that just came from my mouth?

I looked back up at Darren, shocked and horrified at what I had just done, but the look he was giving me did not suggest disappointment. It was pride. He smiled down at me as if I was everything to him, and it filled me with hope.

Darren held the gun up again one last time, and it blew my mind that there was a smile on my face. But then the moment was ruined by the soft laughter emanating from Jared's fucked-up, bloody mouth.

"I hope you enjoy the rest of your life, baby," he mumbled with a cracked chuckle. "You're both so welcome."

I suddenly felt something snap inside me, like a rubber band finally giving way to its pressure.

I never wanted to hear that fucking sound again.

In one motion, I took the gun from Darren's hand, pointed the barrel at the ground to pull back the slide and push the bullet into the chamber, lifted my hand to aim, and pulled the trigger without a second thought.

The sound that left the gun was nothing compared to the sound that followed.

Darren furrowed his brows in disappointed surprise. “He was three feet in front of you, Jaden. How did you miss?” he asked me, irritated.

I smiled in response. “I didn’t miss.”

The bullet pierced into Jared’s neck, shattering his jugular, and causing blood to spill all over him. His eyes went wide as he began to choke on his own blood, the gushing, croaking sounds he made only drew the corners of my mouth up higher. I didn’t take my eyes off him until I saw the life leave his eyes. It was fucking perfect. Even Darren had a smile on his face with my slight deviation from his plan.

When it was over and Jared was dead, I released the slide to close again and handed it back to Darren.

“We done here?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said gravely, taking the gun from my hand and holstering it at his hip. “Go back to the bedroom. I’ll see you up there shortly.”

I nodded and then immediately turned to head for the door, but before I could take another step, Darren snatched my wrist and pulled me to him. His hands gripped my face tightly and then leaned down to kiss me with enough force to strain my neck. But this wasn’t a simple good night kiss. This was passion mixed with what felt like relief and excitement. Had I made him happy with my decision? Fuck, I hoped.

“Welcome back, princess. Fuck, have I missed you,” he whispered against my face. I didn’t know what he meant by that, but I didn’t deliberate much when he released me, and I was escorted back up the stairs.

Each step I took brought me deeper and deeper into the understanding that I had just killed someone. For the very first time, I had personally taken a life. And Darren was right—there was no walking away from that.

I found my breath coming faster, weariness fogging my brain while the contents of my stomach twisted and churned inside me. Bolting forward, I grasped a tree, bent over, and threw up all over the bushes.

“Miss Jaden, are you okay?” Owen asked, his voice full of concern while Clive came to my side.

I spat out the nastiness on my tongue and wiped my mouth with my sleeve, the horror of what I had just done leaving me like the contents of my stomach just had.

“I’m fine. In fact... I’m great,” I said, meaning it.

My hands were officially dirty now, bloodied with darkness and death. I was no longer innocent in this game. I was officially a legit player. No longer the sheep among wolves, but finally a fucking wolf with the marks on my arm and blood on my hands to prove it.

I suddenly felt alive now more than I had in a long time. I didn't know how to explain it or where it had come from, but knowing I had finally, after all this time, succeeded in one small portion of my need for vengeance was enough to ignite something I'd forgotten was there to begin with.

To see blood spilled in my honor by my own hand was a treasure to behold, and I planned to extort the shit out of it. I would not shy away from this; I would embrace the hell out of it. The goal was to become a wolf, and I was officially inducted, and it felt fucking fantastic. I hadn't felt this elated in so long, and I didn't want to let it go. After all the shit I had gone through, I'd somehow found myself again, and it was in the most unlikely place.

After seeing how pleased Darren was with my decision, I instantly knew he'd wanted that. During my retreat, I had forgotten why Darren chose me to begin with. I'd forgotten it was because of how strong I was, how resilient, and how goddamn challenging he loved me to be. That was the girl he wanted. And when I had pulled that trigger, he couldn't have confirmed it any better than the kiss he gave me afterward.

Sid's words suddenly echoed in my head from our conversation on the island.

“You can choose to be a victim, or you can choose to be something else entirely.”

I was finally that something else entirely. I was the fucking phoenix rising from the ashes of her despair and taking flight into victory. From within the shadow of death, I was ready to breathe fire again.

I lifted my head from the bushes with a wide smile and looked into the darkness of the woods, seeing for the first time all the stars between the branches in the distance. Light could be found in the dark, and I was going to extract that shit like diamonds from a mine. I wouldn't lose myself in this. I'd conform, but I wouldn't forget. Not this time. That mouse of a girl Darren had tamed was irrevocably gone and would never be heard from again.

The bitch was back. And she was thirsty as fuck...

To be continued...

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks so much for reading! If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads or on the site of where you bought it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Marie has been writing since she first learned the alphabet, but it wasn't until much, much later that she finally decided to take the deep plunge into the depths of publishing. Her written work conveys a darker side of writing, bringing in to light what most may shy away from. She has a passion for writing strong female characters with a brain that can override their sex drives, deliver one hell of a punch as well as take one. They have backbones made of steel and hearts that beat with a ferocity that refuses to be tamed or matched.

Her inspiration comes in the form of a minefield on top of a snow-covered mountain. One step and a new idea explodes in her head, and then before you know it, she has an avalanche of ideas rushing through her brain and it does not stop!

When she's not writing until the late hours of the night, she's working as a legal assistant at a personal injury law firm in Michigan. She is also a part time law student at the University of Detroit Mercy Law School where she studies in the evening in hopes of becoming a human rights attorney. Preventing the horrendous efforts of human traffickers has become a passion project for her. She meets her goals by spreading awareness in her books and donating a portion of her proceeds to charities benefiting victims of human trafficking. She also enjoys practicing martial arts in her spare time as well as riding around on her Honda Grom motorcycle.

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