



# STRIKE

IF IT DOESN'T  
CHALLENGE YOU,  
IT DOESN'T MAKE YOU...

STRONGER SERIES

# JAY MARIE

# STRIKE

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BOOK FOUR - THE STRONGER SERIES

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

JAY MARIE

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

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# CONTENTS

A Note from Jay

Special 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](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with Jay](#)

[Also by Jay Marie](#)

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## A NOTE FROM JAY

So 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.

To my readers, you guys have been so patient and so supportive, and I can't tell you how much it means to me. Between law school, my wedding, working full time, writer's block, and just life in general, it's a tough act to juggle, but I'm doing it as best I can with what little time I've got. Plus, you know me by now. I like to take my time with my books because I think it just makes the story so much better when it's paced correctly instead of rushing to the conclusion. This book was an off and on with inspiration. It was difficult to get back into the swing of things, trying to reintegrate myself with my characters, but I think I did them justice. Hopefully you find Strike to be worth the wait. I know two years is a long time, but hey, what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger ;)

A big thanks to Bre for her dedication to helping me make this book what it was and catching my many typos and inconsistencies. You're amazing. Also to my husband for helping me figure out how to realistically do the shit I want to do in all of my books lol. Your support, patience, love, and knowledge has been invaluable to me. To Ebony for keeping me straight and helping me with everything I could possibly need to get this beast out there and giving me all your honest input. To my editor, Jenny, for knocking all 625 pages out in like 3 weeks and killin' it! You're awesome!



And to my mom and my cousin, Tara – you both will always be my favorite beta readers ;)

I know the next question will be about the release of Stand, the final book and conclusion to the series. I plan to start it shortly after the release of Strike. I anticipate a release at the end of next year, but as always, I can't guarantee that. I never know what life is going to throw my way. It may slow me down, but it won't stop me, so you can at the very least count on that lol. I don't think I will need to write as much as I did for Strike since there were so many dominos that I needed to line up and I didn't want to rush their fall, so hopefully it won't take me as long to write. I will do my very best to get Stand done as quickly as I can while I approach my final semesters in law school. I graduate December 2020! I can't wait to be done! It'll be interesting closing two chapters of my life next year, law school and the Stronger Series. But I am definitely looking forward to expanding my horizon and taking you guys along for the ride if you want to stick it out with me. I've got a lot of projects I can't wait to get started on and share with you all, but I've got one last book to finish before I can.

Sooooo with that I hope you enjoy this beast! It's about time I finally shared it with the world!

<3 Jay Marie

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## **SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Cover and Web Design by Amanda Simpson

[Pixel Mischief Design](#)

Edited by Jenny Sims

[Editing 4 Indies](#)

Formatted by Jeff Senter

[Indie Formatting Services](#)

Promoted by Ebony Simone McMillan

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*Thank you so much to my amazing team!*

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## DEDICATION

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

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## 1 Year Later

Sweat dripped from my forehead onto the bright blue mats fifteen feet below me. I held my position over the metal bars, both hands gripping the bars with my legs and feet pointed toward the high ceiling. I had been working on this handstand for a while, and now I wanted to up the difficulty. Shifting my weight slightly, my right hand released the bar while my left held my entire body weight. My muscles and wrist burned under the pressure, while more sweat dripped from my hairline as I focused on my breathing. I widened my legs a little bit into a V and took a deep breath before switching to the other hand.

AC/DC played through the tiny cordless earbuds in my ears, the music not quite loud enough to drown out Clive and Owen sparring each other in the caged octagon behind me. Camaro wasn't too far away, my full-grown rotti dragging a one-hundred-pound weight that was attached to a rope by her teeth – her chew toy victim of the hour. And as I re-focused my attention from my personal training room back to my handstand my world became temporarily at peace.

Last year in April, Darren had given me a very special surprise for my twenty-sixth birthday. He gifted me my very own private gym. There had been weeks of construction going on in the house, but no matter how many times I asked, no one would tell me what it was for. The first time I saw the completion, I felt like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* when the Beast opened the doors to her new library, except my library was stocked with enough training equipment to make me drool.

My gym was massive, nearly as big as Darren's, and it had everything I could ever want or need. Four heavy bags of different weights and lengths hung near the padded walls, mats covered the floors in various areas, and a caged octagon took up the entire corner of the gym. I also had a rock-climbing wall, a spring-loaded floor next to a pit containing chunks of landing foam adjacent to a trampoline, dozens of workout machines and weights, a rack of training bo staffs next to a wall of mirrors, a thick rope connected to the ceiling for climbing, and a giant three-level metal jungle gym, which I was currently balancing on my hands at the top level.

I couldn't deny how much I honestly loved my gym. It was my adult playground, and I rarely left it unless it was either nice outside or I absolutely had to. I appreciated that it also accommodated Camaro, and my annoying ass bodyguards. They all might as well train as they were now rather than sit around and watch me do it.

Training was the only thing that kept me sane anymore. The pain I felt from the strain in my muscles told me I was strong enough to withstand it. The air pumping through my lungs from the exertion told me I was still breathing. And the pounding from within my chest told me I was still very much alive. When I pushed myself, I felt in control. I felt powerful because I knew I could accomplish anything. Fuck whatever got in my way. I was fire.

Things had changed so much since that night I killed Jared. It had been a little over a year since then, and I was a completely different animal now. I had allowed so many emotions to slip away from me over the past couple of months: guilt, sympathy, hope, desire, and just fucks in general.

I felt hardened inside as if someone had encased my heart in concrete. I didn't care. I honestly didn't want to feel anything anymore. Not unless it was physical. Physical pain healed eventually. Emotional pain was a different story.

Pain or pleasure – those were my anchors – and so was the man who carried them.

Darren had morphed into a new kind of drug for me. He had become my obsession, just as I was his, but for a completely different reason.

I was obsessed with knowing where he was, what he was doing, why he was doing it, who was involved, and when he would be back. I wasn't privy to any of that information, of course, but I sought for literally anything that could help me anticipate what kind of mood he would be in so I could

accommodate accordingly, adapt to what he needed that day, and be the example of absolute perfection.

But like usual, I never knew shit unless Darren wanted me to.

It was a good thing I had become so good at reading him. I was fluent in his body language now, attuned to the simplest facial expressions. From the tiniest clench in his jaw to the flare of his nostrils, I could usually count on my instincts to predict the outcome. I tried not to be too obvious in my knowledge, knowing how important it was for him to remain unpredictable, but that was only to his enemies. And I wasn't currently an enemy.

I tried not to look at my situation as a prisoner/ captor relationship anymore. I forced myself to see it as more of a business relationship. If I gave Darren what he wanted, he would give me what I wanted. Although I had to admit he was a fickle market sometimes because I still occasionally got fucked over. That was part of the risk, though. I would try to avoid it as best as I could, but sometimes, you couldn't always predict when the stock market would crash and leave you with nothing.

I took my victories in stride, never gloating and always humble. The philosophy served me well, as was my ability to ignore the deep need for my freedom. It was overshadowed by something far greater: I belonged to Darren. Freedom from him didn't exist, and I had learned to live with that. For now.

My conditioning continued long after I was released from the basement – only the techniques had changed. It was really something special when you can feel your own brain being warped right in front of you, and you were helpless to stop it. The tug and pull like a rubber band, expanding in places you never thought possible, until everything finally snaps and your world was brought into perspective. What was once important no longer mattered. What once brought you fear now brought you security. What once was pain now becomes pleasure. Suffering equaled sacrifice, and I gladly placed myself over the altar every day all for the sake of pleasing my god so I could survive another day.

The vibration of the heavy metal doors to my private gym stole my attention as I felt them slam shut, announcing someone's entry. I looked up from my position and saw Scott standing expectantly by the door.

"You ready?" he asked.

Immediately unfolding myself from my handstand into a front cartwheel, I stood perfectly on my feet between the metal bars of my jungle

gym and looked at him.

“About time. I’ve been waiting all morning.”

“Well, let’s go, hotshot. Everyone is waiting on you,” he replied with a smirk.

I nodded and hopped down to the second level of my jungle gym. Running into a full sprint over the wide metal, I fell into another cartwheel, gripping the last few inches of the metal bars and leapt off the jungle gym into a double backflip, completing my landing expertly before standing on two feet. Scott gave me a little applause as I walked over to him with Camaro following in stride. I liked to be a little flashy sometimes.

“Try to avoid what happened last time,” Clive called from the octagon where he and Owen were still sparring. Owen chuckled as he waved me off.

“No survivors this time,” I answered. With a quick wink, I headed out into the hall with Scott and Camaro at my side.

“Someone is confident today,” Scott commented as we headed outside to where my team was currently waiting.

“I’m gonna destroy him,” I claimed.

And I fucking would. It was all I had been planning for the past two weeks. This time, it would work, and I’d own the bragging rights of the century.

Twenty men stood around the patio as they finished strapping on their gear, waiting on me to join them. I quickly changed into the protective tactical clothing that had been laid out for me, pulling on the slim black cargo pants over my workout shorts and the three-quarter sleeve compression shirt over my tank top. After fastening my chest and back plates, boots and gloves, I finished with an additional five pistols in my numerous gun holsters, one hunting knife, and one automatic M16 rifle strapped to my front. Scott placed a protective body vest around Camaro, strapping it tight enough so she wouldn’t be able to wiggle out of it this time. Tightening my ponytail and my bootlaces, I grabbed my helmet, and walked out to my team.

“Okay, this time is going to be different,” I said to them as they turned to listen. “This time, I’m only going to leave five of you to protect our base, and the rest will stick with me. Two men at my three and nine and two at my noon and six. The rest will spread out evenly, and we’ll try to keep them cornered. Camaro will give the signal. We need to also remember that he isn’t playing by the same rules, so remember who the real target is.”

They all nodded in understanding.

“Any questions?” I asked.

One raised his hand. “What happens when we run into an ambush again?”

I glared at him while the rest chuckled under their breath in response. “How about we just don’t this time?” I replied. The rest of my team nodded in unison. “All right then, let’s go.”

As I took a step off the patio with my team, a large heavy hand landed on my shoulder, halting me in my tracks. I turned to see Scott standing over me, wearing a look of intrigue on his face.

“Nice pep talk,” he said, “but he went easy on you last time. He won’t be this time around.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Good,” I said and stepped out.

“I’ll be studying you from the sidelines. Good luck!” he shouted after me.

*I won’t need it.*

We headed to our base through the woods, which was about fifteen yards from the shoreline, and waited for the signal. Adrenaline was already beginning to rush through my veins, my body hot with anticipation and anxiety. I had a point to prove today and I wanted to make it loud and clear. I just hoped I didn’t fuck it up this time.

About sixty seconds later, the red flare we all had been waiting for burst into the sky, initiating that it was go time.

Leaving our five behind, the rest of us quickly made our way through the trees and into the war zone. It wasn’t long before sweat started to drip down my brow under the heat of my helmet, the hot rays of the sun reaching through the trees and soaking into my black tactical uniform. My boots dug deep into the dirt and my hands clutched my rifle tightly into my shoulder as I scanned the area around me, my team of fifteen at my back and a fully-grown Rottweiler at my side, all waiting on my command.

We were maybe five minutes into this little game and my already furiously pounding heart pulsed with the anxiety and doubt I fought to beat down, my breath quickening with each step through the trees. I couldn’t let it distract me or cloud my judgment. I needed to focus, stay in the game.

As we moved cautiously through the trees, the hairs on the back of my neck that had fallen loose from my ponytail clung to my neck uncomfortably while my breath escaped through the ventilation mask from



my helmet. Camaro panted quietly at my side, her ears twitching back and forth, the only signal I was waiting for. And then they perked all the way up as she stiffened.

I held up my fist to signal everyone to freeze and to take cover, all of us carefully ducking behind trees and aiming our rifles in the distance, searching for our opposing targets. And when my target landed in my crosshairs, I gave the signal by firing the first shot.

A wide spray of neon pink covered the chest of my target as well as several other targets as my team followed suit, dusting the air with clouds of hot pink as multiple men fell backward, ultimately surrendering with their hands raised. I smiled and quickly moved on ahead, Camaro keeping in stride while my remaining guys followed suit as we left the three players now out of the game behind.

As we approached our enemy's territory, we crept behind a mass of trees to regroup. Ditching my helmet, I pulled out the mini binoculars from my side pants pocket and climbed to the first branch to get a glimpse of the situation ahead of us. A six-foot pole with a blue flag waving at the top stood completely alone in a small clearing, not a single guard in sight.

"Fucking seriously?" I whispered under my breath. I knew it was a trap without even thinking about it.

"What are we looking at?" Brett called from below.

I shook my head as I continued to look beyond the flag for signs of anything else. There wasn't shit. "Nothing. There's no one guarding the flag."

There was a collection of muttered cursing below me. I didn't blame them. Capture the Flag wasn't as much fun if there was nothing but an ambush waiting for you in enemy territory. Again.

*Not this time.*

Disregarding my assigned limits, I pocketed my binoculars and began to climb higher.

"Jaden, what are you doing?" my team called from below me.

"Winning," I muttered as I continued to climb higher until I got a better view of the clearing.

Perching on a thick branch, I pressed my back into the trunk of the tree and pulled out my binoculars again, scanning every inch of the clearing and its surrounding areas. And that was when I finally found the ambush waiting for us. Twelve of Darren's men were evenly spaced along the lining

of the trees on the other side of the clearing. Crouching low in the shadows, they remained hidden from prying eyes.

Unless you were me.

The other five that were missing from my count were probably replacing the three we took out to take our flag. Hopefully my team could handle them.

Satisfied with my new intel, I climbed down from the tree as quickly as I could and plopped down onto the ground.

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t witness that,” Brett said as the rest of the guys surrounded me.

“And I’m gonna pretend you guys don’t play dirty in the real world,” I shot back with a glare. These men were still in the late stages of training as Darren’s soldiers, but they weren’t exactly novices either. This game was just another giant exercise for all of us – my second one, in fact – but it was one I intended on excelling in. “Now, shut up and pay attention. Twelve men are stationed on the north side of the clearing. I’m assuming the other five probably went after our flag. So we’re gonna need to create a distraction to lead them away. Max, you’re the fastest, so you head for the flag while Mark and Jackson cover you. The rest are with me.”

“You want the twelve of us to distract twelve men?” Zack questioned with clear disdain.

“No, I want the thirteen of us to distract twelve men.” I patted Camaro and tousled her ears. “Camaro counts.”

A few of the guys shrugged in agreement.

Camaro was my badass sidekick now. She might have the mentality and energy of a puppy, but she was a full-grown beast of a dog with the jaws of a lioness. No one wanted to be on the receiving end of her bite. Ever.

“Any questions?” I asked as I moved to grab my helmet. At the sight of shaking heads, I clipped it back into place and grabbed my rifle. “Let’s go,” I ordered, my voice slightly muffled through the ventilation.

The twelve of us left the three I ordered to stay back and quickly rounded the outside of the north bank of the clearing. We stayed back far enough so as not to draw too much attention from the other team as we slowly made our way in. I held my fist up for everyone to see, signaling for them to freeze. Halting, I searched ahead for the man I knew was already looking for me. And it worried me when I didn’t immediately see him.

*Well, it was now or never.*

Clutching my rifle, I dug it deep into my shoulder and gave Camaro a low quick whistle.

She instantly took off through the trees like a damn lightning bolt. If you blinked, you would have missed her, and like the best distraction she was, all the targets ahead of us had tilted their guns in her direction. But they would never get the chance to fire as we engaged in our attack.

Wet colors of blue and pink lit up the trees, splattering all over the branches and grass as we moved in, our formation working to our advantage as pink dominated the blue. I was able to take out two of Darren's men, reloading quickly and moving beyond the trees toward the border of the clearing to make sure my guys were able to get the damn flag and get out.

But as I advanced, two men jumped out from behind the trees and fired. I quickly dodged, rounding backward around another tree while giving Camaro the loud whistle to return and attack. As she'd been trained, she launched herself at the back of the guard to my right while I aimed for the guard at my left, coating him with pink while just narrowly missing the blue that splattered all over the tree behind me. Camaro completely took her target to the ground, snarling and clawing at his gear until he was officially out of play with his hands raised in surrender.

I whistled for her to follow me and ran for the edge of the clearing, seeing Max and Mark make off with the flag, leaving Jackson behind since he was covered in blue. I ran after them but came to a halt when they were immediately ambushed with more splatters of blue. I fired back at the two new intruders, using the last of the bullets of my rifle and gaining their surrender.

Dumping my empty rifle on the ground and switching for one of my pistols, I snatched the flag that was now in Max's hand and made a run for it, Camaro striding ahead of me to advance on anyone in my way. If I got the flag back to our base, we would win and I would finally get to drive one of Darren's cars. I was not about to lose that opportunity.

Running like my life depended on it, I ditched my helmet along the way to lose more weight while my heart pounded away in my chest. I was maybe twenty yards away from our flag post, and I could feel myself getting too excited about the prospect of winning. I was close. Too close.

And then Camaro barked way too late before I felt the impact of a body impaling me to the ground and knocking my gun from my hand. I took

charge of my momentum, keeping us rolling until I was on top and instantly tightened my thighs around the thick mass of muscled torso beneath me to keep him still. And the only thing I noticed when I looked down was the dazzling and devilish smile that made my stomach squirm and my heart skip beats.

“Look at that, already right where I wanted you,” Darren sneered as his hands moved to grip my hips, his touch sending a wave of tension through my spine. But I wasn’t done fighting yet.

“Not this time,” I declared and moved for the small pistol at my back, but he was already shifting under me as if I wasn’t even there, far too fast for me to counter.

My pistol was in my hand by the time my back hit the ground, aiming at his chest and pulling the trigger just as he knocked it out of my hands. But at least my legs had the right muscle memory for this because they were already raised, allowing my feet to dig right into Darren’s hips to keep him back.

I shoved with every last ounce of strength I had and managed to kick him off me and roll back to my feet. Ignoring the sound of gun shots around me, I was in a dead run before Darren was even up on his feet.

It only took a few seconds before I realized Camaro was not following me like she should. She was always supposed to be at my side. A single glance behind me was all I needed to see she was sitting back on her haunches, blue paint covering her fur. Fury instantly burst in my chest.

*He fucking shot her!! That bastard shot my dog!*

I was going to murder him. Just as soon as I won this damn game. And then I’d rub it in his stupid dog-shooting face. She’d be okay, though. It was only a paintball, and she could take way worse than that. Camaro was a fucking monster now.

I sprinted through the trees, jumping over thick roots and rocks, ignoring the heat I felt at my back, knowing full well Darren was gaining on me. All I had to do was make it to my post before he got to me, and we would win. Game over.

Deciding to give myself a small moment to breathe, I gripped the pistol at my side, turned and immediately open fired at him, but he was quick enough to maneuver against a tree and evade my shots. I emptied the entire clip, ditched the gun, and then took off again, running behind another tree

for more cover just in case he returned fire. I doubted he would, though. He loved the chase way too much to end it that quickly.

I was less than ten yards when I witnessed the two guards at my post get splattered with blue paint before I felt myself hauled into the air and then slammed into a body as we hit the ground. Arms tighter than a vise held me still before I was rolled onto my front and officially pinned.

“Gotcha,” Darren’s smug voice taunted in my ear.

I groaned and squirmed to see if there was any give in his hold, but there was none. His legs pressed over mine, keeping them completely immobile while his heavy upper body nearly crushed me into the ground.

*Fuck, I was so close.*

I looked up to see my flag post was empty of our flag, it’s whereabouts probably making its way to Darren’s right this second. But getting our flag was never on Darren’s agenda. He had to get me to their base, which meant I still had a fighting chance.

“You know, you actually made it closer to the post this time.” Darren snickered as he gripped the back of my protective vest and yanked me to my feet and started dragging me back to his base. God, he was so fucking strong it wasn’t even fair.

“I can’t believe you shot my dog!” I shouted as I made attempts to evade him.

He didn’t look surprised but cocked a brow. “You expect my enemies to spare her?”

I scowled at him, hating that I couldn’t argue with that. His enemies would probably take her out first, and then they’d have to deal with the rage of a thousand suns if they managed to make off with me. If anyone harmed my dog, I would rain so much hellfire on them.

When I didn’t say anything, he picked me up and hauled me over one broad shoulder, but in that split second, I already had my arm tucked around his neck and under his chin in a deep headlock, my legs looping around his wide muscular torso and digging into the back of his thighs to allow my body to stretch and gain more ground.

A few more of Darren’s surviving men began to gather, and I worried that they would intervene if I got away. So I grabbed the pistol that was still attached to my other side and began firing at them, taking out two before Darren took the advantage of my less deeper grip and threw me off him. I

rolled to the ground and started to run again, but two shots to the back of my knees had me stumbling to the ground in undeniable pain.

“Motherfucker!” I screamed as I turned on my back to shoot at Darren, but by the time I aimed he’d already ripped it out of my hands. I moved my legs to kick his knees, but he sauntered left and was on me in a second, grasping my forearms with a bruising grip and turning me over onto my side so he could slap my ass with so much force I thought my skin broke.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to swear, but I knew Darren loved punishing me for it more, so I kept it up when it was appropriate, even if my skin always paid for it.

“Had enough yet?” he asked as he turned me back over to face him, that smug look on his stupidly gorgeous face making me want to punch his perfectly white teeth in.

“Probably not,” I muttered.

Twisting his fingers into my hair, behind my ponytail, Darren hauled me to my feet and began leading me farther and farther away from my base.

*No! I’m literally right here!*

With one more attempt, I dropped all my weight to the ground, causing Darren to drop slightly with me and nearly ripping all my hair out. But it was the sudden imbalance in his step that allowed me to twist slightly and kick him right in the side of the knee and punch down at his forearm hard enough to get him to release my hair. It was just enough for me to slip away and grab a nearby rock to wrap Darren’s flag around and lift my hand to toss it at our base.

But just as I was about to throw it, my wrist was snatched in midair and painfully twisted around to my back, making me curse his snake-like reflexes. With no other option left, Darren took the rock from my hand and placed it in his pocket before pulling me back to my feet. I barely had time to tuck my chin before he could wrap his big meaty arm around my neck in a sort of choke and drag me back to his base. He walked so fast I could hardly keep up, my legs tripping over everything in our path until I could finally see the base up a head where the rest of our team had gathered.

*Good. I’d have an audience for this.*

With one last final attempt, my energy already depleting, I tucked both my hands around Darren’s elbow at my throat and lifted myself up to wrap both my legs behind me to hook around Darren’s right knee and yank forward. An irritated growl rumbled from his throat as he stumbled forward,

allowing me to release my legs and twist my entire body as hard as I could while simultaneously pinching the backside of his upper arm, causing him to flinch and giving me the wiggle room I needed to escape.

But my victory was short lived – like usual.

Before I could even take off, Darren's massive arm was already wrapped around my middle, clutching me tightly to his side, but as he straightened to his full height, he hoisted me up to let me dangle horizontally off the side of his hip. It was the most awkward and uncomfortable position as I hung there limply, facing the trees, trying to figure out how to move somehow.

"What are you doing?" I shrieked as I struggled against the bizarre hold.

"You're officially done," he replied and continued walking to his base in silence.

From the awkward position, I turned my head to see his base was only a few short yards away, turning my struggle into a full-on fight. But the harder I fought, the tighter he held me, to the point where I could hardly take a breath.

"Stop struggling, or I'll make it worse," he threatened, giving me another tight squeeze in warning. Phantom pain reminded me of what broken ribs felt like. I didn't need to experience it again.

Resorting to my defeat, all I could do was endure and wait for him to finish making a goddamn spectacle of me.

When he finally stood in front of the flagpole that was currently missing his blue flag, he pulled me up to standing and pushed my back into the pole. Cheers reached the air as the men hollered their victory, and all I could do was roll my eyes.

*Motherfucker. Whatever. Lick your wounds and walk it off.*

Darren looked down at me expectantly, that shark-like grin of his already starting to warm my blood. I forced myself to shrug it off.

"Hey, at least I made it off with your flag this time," I said, challenging him with my own smirk.

"You did much better this time," he replied, his tone dry, but I could hear a small hint of approval in there somewhere.

I nodded, crossing my arms and glancing down before I noticed a small dusting of pink just under Darren's protective vest.

"Wait a minute," I said and quickly pulled back the underside of his vest to find a clear shot of pink to the right of his abdomen. "I hit you!" I

shouted, excitement filling up my eyes as I turned to look at him. When we had first wrestled on the ground, I managed to pull the trigger before he knocked it out of my hands. It must have gone up under the vest so I never noticed it until now.

“You’re supposed to be out,” I said carefully.

Darren’s face revealed nothing as he stepped even closer to me, his large form towering over me and making me suck in a breath as he leaned into my ear.

“It’s cute that you think a bullet there would have stopped me.”

The sound of his dark voice made my spine shiver, but I exhaled to stay focused.

“Those weren’t the rules,” I argued, my mouth suddenly going dry. “You get shot in the back, torso, or head, or attacked by Camaro, you’re out. Fair, square, authentic.”

Darren snorted. “Your first mistake was expecting me to fight fair. I fight smart. I don’t give a fuck about fair. And your second mistake was thinking I wouldn’t notice you disregarding the rule for your climbing restrictions. Who’s the cheater now?”

I furrowed my brows at him, trying hard not to get angry while also trying not to panic about the fact that he’d clearly seen me in that tree long before I ever saw him on the field. But this whole thing was turning into bullshit really quickly.

“First, that climbing rule is unreasonable and *will* be disregarded in the real world. Second, my ‘cheating’ compared to yours isn’t nearly the same. I’m not defying death.”

“But you did defy walking, talking, and fighting after I distinctly remember blowing out the back of your knees. Or is that not of the same caliber, *counselor*?”

He sneered at me as he openly mocked me for my interrupted days as a law student. I was a year and a half away from graduating when I was taken during the summer semester. Unfortunately, my skills for arguing and debating didn’t always help me against Darren since it was his laws I was arguing against. It was hard to win when you lacked standing and the only hope you had rested on a damn plea bargain. But if he wanted to argue on the merits, I was game.

“You actually wanna argue causation with me right now? Fine. Had you complied with the rules in the first place, you would have been out, I never



would have been shot, and therefore would have won the game. Your rebuttal, *counselor*.”

He chuckled, the low rumble igniting my pulse all over again. “There is no guarantee you would have won, and a hypothetical is not an argument. But when your opponent has absolute immunity, your quest for causation ultimately becomes moot.”

I felt my face become hot with absolute rage as he snickered at me.

*Don't get mouthy. Don't get mouthy. Steer it back to the main point.*

I exhaled a deep breath through my nose, trying not to lash out as my gaze remained trained on his. “All right then, let's just focus on the main issue here. If you're going to disregard the biggest rule of all, then why are you even playing?”

He narrowed his gaze at me, that dark look making my stomach churn with warning. With his massive build towering over me, each muscle so large and expertly toned to fit one destructive purpose, it was easy to be reminded of all the horrible things he was physically capable of, my fear of past experiences with him a caveat I couldn't shake. Even as I tried to focus on his words, my body still wanted to cower and hide. But I couldn't let it. Today was about showing strength, not fear.

“Because you need to learn how to anticipate and fight against cheaters,” Darren answered. And then he casually shrugged with an evil smirk as he regarded me closely. “And because hunting you down is one of my new favorite things to do. We should play again next month.”

Now I was just pissed. Shoving him away from me, which did very little, I sidestepped him. “Fine, then! Next time, I'll make sure to aim for your fucking eyes.”

Darren stepped in quickly, his entire body backing me up against the thick steel pole behind me. “Careful, princess, you know how much I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

Fuck, he was hard already. I could feel him pressing into me with lustful anticipation in his eyes. If I wasn't careful, he'd fuck me right here in front of his men. I needed to remind him why that was a bad idea.

“Don't get too excited. I doubt you'll love it just as much if your men get to witness it.”

In response, Darren gripped my hips to lift me up against the pole and wrapped my legs around his waist, the anticipation of what was coming warming my entire body.

“Since when are they a concern to you? I could fuck you with your clothes still on,” he said, his voice low as he traced my jawline with his nose. My heart rate was starting to spike again already, fear and anxiety returning as I wondered how much pain he would grant this time. The uncertainty was already making me wet.

“Have you seen yourself in bed lately? My clothes don’t exactly survive you. So unless you want to give everyone a show and then murder them afterward, I would suggest ordering them to leave.”

Darren’s hands started to travel, my skin responding with each touch as his thumbs played along my waistline, setting all my nerve endings on fire.

“Please,” I whimpered into his ear, a tiny hint of desperation in my voice.

The sex kitten voice was usually the final nail in the coffin.

Darren groaned into my ear, the soft rumble making my stomach tighten knowing how much it took for him to restrain himself. I actually appreciated the effort.

Finally, he tore himself away to turn to the surrounding men in the field who were still watching us and shouted. “Everyone has ten seconds to clear the fuck out or find a real bullet between their eyes!” And just like that, everyone ghosted, disappearing back into the trees and hopefully heading back toward the house.

“Happy?” Darren asked as he turned back to face me.

“Happier.”

“Good.”

I didn’t get in much more than that as Darren’s mouth immediately latched on to the side of my neck, his teeth grazing along my skin while his hands moved to unclip the protective vest around my torso. It was quickly ripped away from me and discarded to the ground along with all my holsters and remaining gear.

When only my shirt, pants, and boots remained, Darren gripped the ends of my shirt and tore it open, exposing the black zippered sports bra underneath, the only acceptable sports bra Darren would allow me. He made quick work of that, pulling the zipper down and allowing my breasts to spill free into his waiting palms. He massaged and kneaded them, his thumbs drifting over my nipples and sending all kinds of signals straight to my clit. I could feel my core heating up for him, the wetness gathering

between my legs while everything else pulsed with a need I still hated to admit.

As his mouth replaced his hands, kissing and sucking, they traveled to my pants. The button and zipper were quickly dealt with before he pulled away to grip the top of my pants and rip them farther down the center, revealing the little black thong I had underneath.

“You know, they might not be able to see you. But they are *definitely* going to hear you,” he sneered.

I groaned as he started on his own zipper. “Well, if you keep destroying all my clothes, they are definitely going to *see* a whole lot when we eventually walk out of here.”

Darren shook his head as he released his bulging hard cock from the confines of his pants. “I doubt you’ll be walking anywhere after this.” And then he speared right into me, his hard length taking up every single square inch of me and demanding more as he began to withdraw and pound back in to my already aching pussy.

“Oh, fuck!” I shouted, barely able to contain the cries coming from my throat as I fought to regulate my breathing.

Darren didn’t waste much time as he kept me suspended against the pole, relying on him entirely to support me as he drilled in and out of my body. From this position, I could feel all of him, every painful, pleasure-driving inch that was bringing me closer and closer to the edge of destruction. And just when I felt myself begin to slide over that edge, he shifted his angle to focus solely on my G-spot and practically shoved me into a spine-shattering orgasm that left me screaming and then absolutely breathless. It didn’t take Darren much longer to find his release as my pussy convulsed around him.

Leaning forward on a satisfied sigh, I rested my chin on his shoulder, my body melting around his as I relaxed into him.

“Happy?” I mumbled.

“Happier,” he replied, mocking my earlier response.

“Good. I need a shirt.”

Without a response, he pulled my torso away from him to lean me back against the pole, removed his own shirt, and placed it over my head. I looped my arms through the sleeves and straightened it around my stomach so that it would fall over my hips and hide my ruined pants. Pulling out of

me, Darren tucked himself back into his pants and then pulled me back to his chest as he turned to leave the clearing.

“What about our stuff?” I asked, not really caring either way.

“I’ll send Eric to get it.”

“Mmmm,” I murmured. “You’re still a cheater.”

Darren slapped my ass hard enough to make me wince. “And you’re still my victory prize. Don’t ever expect a game of capture the flag to change that.”

I sighed against him, secret misgivings clouding my thoughts.

*If only it were that simple.*

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“Wake up, princess.”

WHACK.

*My eyes refused to open, too heavy to lift, too tired to care.*

WHACK.

*A groan was all I could muster as the sharp pain of Darren’s belt against my lower back reminded me of how sore I still was from the night before. My wrists ached and my arms were numb from their position. Spending seven hours shackled to a St. Andrew’s Cross was definitely at the top of my list of worst ways to sleep ever.*

*I attempted to clench and unclench my fists to get the blood flowing again, but I could barely move them, the cold of the room doing very little to aid me. I tried resting my head against my arm, but all that did was stretch my neck to an awkward uncomfortable angle.*

*Through all the pain, aches, and numbness, my body could never ignore when Darren touched it. His hands traveled over my hips, up my rib cage, along the sides of my breasts, higher to my shoulders to press his thumbs into the tender muscles, creating a circular motion that hurt and healed at the same time.*

*For a solid thirty seconds, Darren massaged my shoulders, moving along my arms and bringing some life back into my limbs before he finally released the latch keeping me prisoner.*

*The next thing I knew, I was lying face down on the bed, the soft sheets my only reprieve from the wretched night before. I should just give up and stop fighting him, but I wanted the fucker to at least work for his money. If he really was going to break me this time, he’d have to earn it.*

*“You did well last night, Jaden. Now, if you can get through this without making a sound, I might actually let you sleep in the bed tonight.”*

*The sound of Darren’s deep voice made my fingers immediately clench the sheets, but I intended to yield. I wanted to sleep on a mattress for once.*

*The bed dipped under his weight as he sat down beside me, his eyes lingering on the destruction of my backside. Too exhausted to do anything but lay there, I didn’t even flinch when I heard him unsheathe the knife I knew he always kept at his side.*

*Fuck.*

*“Not a sound, princess,” he warned, and then a sharp pain seared its way into my upper left ass cheek.*

*I held my breath for a second before slowly releasing it, not even allowing my erratic heart beat to be heard as Darren cut into me.*

*The cuts were long and excruciatingly slow, my abs clenching with each exhale while my nails ripped holes in the sheets. He was carving something; I could feel it.*

*And that knowledge gave my tears permission to fall.*

*When he was done, he dabbed my skin with a cloth and then snapped a photo with his phone.*

*“Tell me who you belong to, Jaden,” he ordered.*

*“You,” I croaked robotically.*

*Holding the phone out in front of my face for me to see, I wasn’t even shocked at what he’d done.*

*His initials “DD” were now carved into my skin. As if the ink on my wrists weren’t enough, he had to physically scar me as well. Mutilate me inside and out.*

*“Goddamn right,” he murmured softly, getting up from the bed. “Now let’s make sure this scars like it should.”*

*My heart started to pound all over again.*

*“Darren,” I moaned in panic, but all he did was shush me.*

*“There’s no pleasure without pain, princess,” he answered, almost apologetically. “You know this.”*

*“Please,” I cried, but my whimpered plea fell on heartless ears because when he poured the salt over my still bleeding flesh, I lost all hope of holding my silence.*

*I didn’t know I could scream that loud.*

*“Wake up, princess.”*

I jolted in my sleep, my muscles tensing as I gripped the sheets, my eyes immediately scanning for threats and finding only one.

Darren was sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, his dark blues staring down at me with what looked like suspicion. I didn't want to be a concern, so I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and gave him a small sleepy smile.

"Morning," I murmured.

"Dreaming about me?" he asked. Even in his inquiry, he couldn't hide the little evil glint in his eye.

I curled into my pillow, staring up at him with a wide innocent sleepy look, the one that I knew only slightly softened that tough exterior he exerted. "What else is there to dream about?"

"I could think of a few things," he whispered as he bent down to gently kiss my lips.

Darren knew I'd been having nightmares of my time with him in the basement for the better part of a year now. No matter how much therapy I had with Sid or which sleep aids I took, I just couldn't seem to shake them. But in a way, I didn't want to. I didn't want to forget why I should be afraid of him. I didn't want to forget what he was capable of and what he could so easily take away. Those nightmares kept me safe from the reality of ever really going back. Something I would absolutely not do.

And for some dark reason, I knew Darren felt the same way.

"I'll be back in a few hours," he said, his lips caressing mine just as softly as he spoke. "I have a surprise for you later."

I felt my heart rate spike a little. He had no idea how much his surprises still gave me anxiety.

"Is it a pony?" I asked, feigning my distress.

"It might be. Guess you'll have to wait and see."

He kissed me goodbye one last time before standing up and heading to the door, closing it gently behind him.

*Goddammit.*

Now I would have to stew over whatever fresh hell he was planning for me later. The day was already ruined, and I hadn't even gotten out of bed yet. Fuck.

My morning went by in a blur, the staff paying little attention to me as I quickly ate my breakfast prepared by Pascal and then spent the remainder of it studying human anatomy. I swam laps in the pool for an hour before

lunch and then played with Camaro for another hour, tossing frisbees in the air for her to catch to make sure she got her daily exercise.

When Darren eventually came home, he went straight to his office, calling Clive and Owen for their weekly meetings to discuss me and any potential threats, security changes, or upcoming events that required preparation. If Darren was planning on taking me somewhere, he'd let them know well in advance if he could.

Since I had the time to myself, I decided to spend my entire afternoon in my gym, angrily throwing knives into the outlines of bodies spray painted on the wooden wall. Three knives were currently competing for the space over what would be an Adam's apple. I was still slightly wounded over yesterday's bullshit loss.

Over the past six months, I was a little surprised at how well I took to throwing knives, or blades in general. Darren had gotten me a purple butterfly knife for Christmas last year, and I couldn't believe how much I loved twirling that little thing around my hands when I needed a distraction. Scott had even taught me a few fun tricks to practice on my own. I'd almost perfected those.

Taking a break from sulking over yesterday's loss, I climbed to the top of my massive jungle gym, stood at the edge with my arms out, and fell backward into the foam pit below. Something about the free fall brought me a moment of peace. In those three seconds, not a single thing but air could touch me.

The moment I landed, square chunks of foam buried my face while a series of panicked barks came from Camaro as she ran over to the edge of the pit. She jumped back and forth, barking at me, her ass wagging all over the place as if she were about to jump in. And that was when I panicked.

"Don't you dare jump in here!" I yelled at her. "Getting you out will be a huge pain in the ass, and I don't feel like lifting you out again. I'm fine!" I didn't know why I was reasoning with her since she couldn't understand me. And if she felt I was in danger, then she'd act anyway. "Camaro, no!" I shouted again just as she leapt off the edge and into the pit. "Goddammit."

Awkwardly pushing myself off the foam, I shuffled through the chunks trying to get to Camaro as she struggled to maneuver through the large pieces. It didn't help that she was panicking because she couldn't get to me. "Hey, hey, it's fine. I'm fine. You're fine. Let's just get you out of here. Paws up," I said, tapping the edge of the pit. She struggled to get her weight



up, her paws barely making it to the top of the ledge, but after a moment, I got her there, lifting her backside and pushing her out of the pit until she could pull herself up.

Pulling myself up, I sat on the ledge, grabbed a piece of foam, and lightly tossed it at her. “Punk,” I said. She responded by gripping the foam with her teeth and running into the caged octagon with it. “Hey, bring that back!” She just made the face she normally made when she wanted to specifically play tug-of-war. “Okay, brat, have it your way.”

I got up and headed into the cage, bending my knees low before I attacked the foam in her mouth, wrestling it away from her as best I could, but all that did was cost me a chunk of foam. Camaro eventually released it and ran out of the cage as if she too were disappointed in the loss of her victory. Examining the foam, there were teeth marks all over it and a large chunk was officially missing. She better not have eaten it.

Camaro’s loud bark had me turning my head toward the exit of the cage, making me stop in my tracks when I noticed Darren’s youngest brother, Dominic, standing in front of it. What the fuck? Where did he come from, and how did he get in here without me noticing? Darren hadn’t mentioned that Dominic would be coming in from Vegas, which officially made me nervous.

Camaro quickly made her way back over toward the cage with a loud growl that turned into a snarl and echoed off the walls as she cornered Dominic.

I usually avoided him like the plague whenever he came around, dodging every interaction with him as much as possible. He was confrontational at his core, provoking and challenging everything in front of him until they either caved or attacked like he wanted them to. He was a professional shit-starter, and I wanted nothing to do with him. I was grateful that Darren mostly kept him away from me for obvious reasons, which was why I was now confused as to why the fuck he was suddenly standing in my own gym.

I gave Camaro the low whistled command that she could yield, Dominic’s unimpressed look turning to agitation as he watched her sit back on her haunches with a gruff, her teeth still bare. I didn’t blame her.

Dominic chuckled at her. “That’s a cute trick, little girl. I wonder if my brother has one just like it for you?” A single eyebrow lifted at me inquisitively as I ignored the dig and furrowed my brows at him.

“Does Darren know you’re here?” I asked, somewhat politely.

He slowly shook his head. “Nah, thought I’d surprise him for once.”

I nodded. “Okay, well, he’s in a meeting right now, but I’m sure one of the guards has alerted him that you’re here.” I wanted him to know that “surprises” were hard to come by here, unless you were Darren, of course.

“That’s good. Suppose I’ll wait here for him then?”

I gave him a small smile, trying not to seem uncomfortable. “If you’d like.”

I started moving toward the exit of the cage, hoping he would take the hint and move aside. But of course, he didn’t. Instead his muscular arms reached out across the doorframe of the cage, gripping it tightly and blocking the entire door, increasing the unease growing in my stomach. Though he wasn’t nearly as big as Darren, his body still took up a large portion of my exit, especially with him stretched out like that. Clad in baggy black sweatpants and a dark red Adidas T-shirt, it was the most casual I’d ever seen him. Was he here to just lounge about or was he here on business?

“You know, maybe you can help me understand something here. Because I’m honestly a little confused as to what a shrimp like you is doing in a big fighting cage like this?” he asked, his tone playfully dangerous while a wicked smile stretched across his face.

*Don’t engage. Don’t engage. Don’t engage.*

But I knew not answering him wouldn’t help either.

“I asked you a question,” he barked, the smile completely disappearing now.

*Do not feed him.*

“This is my private training room, and I train in here often,” I replied smoothly, meeting his eyes but doing my best to remain un confrontational.

“Uh-huh,” he murmured, moving further up the steps to lean his hip against the frame, crossing his arms over his chest. “Training for what?”

He fucking knew very well what.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Polka dancing, what else?” I said sarcastically, rolling my shoulders and giving him a sly smile. Maybe he would respond better to jokes?

“Ha, clearly. Maybe you should show me some of your moves then, so I can see if you’re the real deal,” he suggested, his eyes roaming over my body and making me unconsciously cross my arms over my chest.

I gave him a small polite smile. "I need to go wash up for dinner and take care of my dog. Maybe another time." I took a few more steps toward him, hoping he would finally take the hint and move out of the way, but he didn't budge.

"Maybe right now because I fucking told you to, ya little cunt," he growled.

I immediately scowled in response. Cunt? Obviously being polite was getting me nowhere, and it was getting to the point where I'd have to threaten him with Darren, which would probably only push him further. But then again, some men respected me more when I snapped at them. Dominic's tone was giving me no room for objections, but he forgot one thing: I answer to only one person. And I'd officially lost my patience.

"Maybe fuck off and we won't have any problems, yeah?" I shot back at him, the scowl on my face growing with each passing second that he continued to block the door.

His brow shot up in surprise, a crooked smile forming on his mouth as he took in my words. "What the fuck did you just say to me?" he barked as he started taking steps toward me. "Do you have any idea who the fuck I am?"

His advancement had my left leg moving slightly backward as I angled my body just in case, Camaro's growl rolling again as she watched me. He might be family to Darren, but I doubted that meant he could touch or hurt me if he was so inclined. I knew that much by now. But how mad would Darren be at me if I kicked the shit out of his little brother just for being a total tool bag?

"First of all, this is my private gym. No one is supposed to be in here except me, my guards, or the cleaning staff. Second, you should be—"

I narrowly dodged the backhand that was about to smack against my mouth, maneuvering out of the way and putting enough distance so that he couldn't do it again from where he stood. Camaro barked then, standing to her full height now, waiting for me to give her the command to attack, but I whistled low again to calm her down. She didn't like it.

"Oh, you little bitch," Dominic sneered, a dark chuckle vibrating up his throat, sending all kinds of warnings and red flags in the air. "You expect to talk shit like that and get away with it?"

"You know I don't answer to you," I replied coolly, backing up and slowly trying to make my way for the door without giving him cause to

chase me. I wouldn't make it. "And I'm not in the habit of letting just anyone hit me."

"Oh? You reserve that honor for my brother?" he asked, his tone taunting and vicious.

"I reserve *myself* for your brother and don't engage with others, his family included. Now, if you don't mind, I should go before this escalates into something it shouldn't."

My palms were spread out in front of me, my knees bent, and my voice calm, but of course, Dominic never listened to reason. He was too young and hotheaded for that. He clearly wanted to play and here I was in the playpen. Fuck. I really was gonna have to kick the shit out of him.

He regarded me for a split second, smirked, and then turned to head back to the exit of the cage. I blew a quiet sigh of relief as I watched him, but the relief was quickly extinguished when he grabbed the door of the cage and slammed it shut so we were both closed in. Camaro started barking again, the sound echoing off the walls like a damn thunderstorm.

*Ah, fuck.*

"Oh, honey," Dominic mocked, walking back toward me in the middle of the cage. "It's already escalated thanks to your smart mouth. Clearly, my brother hasn't beaten that out of you yet. I guess I'll have to do it for him." And then he folded his hands to crack his knuckles.

I rolled my eyes. *For fuck's sake.*

"You're making a mistake. Darren won't be happy when he finds out you tried to fight me."

"Tried to fight you? That's adorable. I heard you've got some skills, though I doubt they'll match up in a real fight. But I'm curious to see how long you can last."

I groaned aloud in annoyance. This guy just wasn't getting it.

"Last chance. Let me out. *Now.*"

He chuckled as he rolled his neck. "Listen to you with that imposing tone. Did you learn that from Darren? It's cute."

I shook my head. "You're really gonna regret this," I warned for the last time.

"The only thing I'll regret is not getting to fuck you right afterward. Gotta leave Darren with something left after this." And then he lunged for me, which was the wrong move, as all his body weight came forward in an attempt to tackle me to the ground.

Parrying his arm away from me, I sidestepped him while holding my leg out and letting him trip over it. He stumbled and almost hit the ground but recovered quickly, turning back to me with surprise written all over his face. And then it changed back into a challenging smile I recognized instantly. A family trait.

This time, he came back with a series of strikes aimed at my face and body, all of which I dodged or blocked, maneuvering quickly before countering with a quick warning jab to the nose. I was waiting for him to wear himself out a bit more before I gave him the full power of my strikes.

Camaro was going absolutely insane against the cage as we fought. Her snarling and barking as she ripped and bit at the metal separating her from me made it difficult to drown out while trying to stay focused on my opponent. I was worried she was going to tear the shit out of her gums if I didn't finish this up quickly.

"You are pretty good," Dominic grumbled as he shuffled his feet, his speech working to contain the wheezing in his lungs. Someone clearly did not train every day. "But you won't last much longer."

I laughed. "Says the guy who's currently huffing for breath?" I gestured toward him, his expression granting me a wounded snarl in return.

"One hit, little girl," Dominic growled, holding up his index finger. "One hit is all it would take to bring you down."

"If ... you can hit me," I taunted with a smirk. I couldn't help the instinct; it was the easiest and quickest slope to an opponent's downfall, or in this case, Dominic's. Riling men up, using their massive egos against them so they would get emotional and make a mistake. It was almost a guarantee unless you were Darren, of course. Getting a reaction out of him was nearly impossible ... unless it involved me taking my clothes off.

Dominic lunged again, but this time, he ran right back into the cage when I quickly sidestepped him, circling out of the way again and groaning aloud, no longer able to control my annoyance with his fighting style.

"You fight like a fucking jock out of high school. All rage and no strategy. How the fuck do you run Vegas like this?" I mocked again. At least *my* strategy was working. His face was getting redder by the minute as his chest heaved more and more oxygen, increasing the wheezing sound he was trying to hide.

"Fucking little bitch!" he yelled, launching from the cage, and swinging his fists at me from all kinds of directions. And then he lifted his leg for a

kick to my torso, as if he finally remembered that he had legs.

Fuck this noise.

As soon as he lifted his knee, I was already spinning, stepping just outside his reach, and bringing my foot up to clock him right in the side of the head with a reverse hook kick. That had him stunned for a good couple of seconds, which was just enough time for my momentum to bring my back leg up for a side kick to his diaphragm and knock the wind out of him.

Using the same leg, I then shifted my hips to bring my heel down hard into the side of his knee, bringing him to the floor like a sack of potatoes. The second he dropped an inch, my fist was already aiming for his nose, punching him once and rearing back for a second. My knuckles smarted with the impact, but the feel of that connection was worth it. I'd been wanting to punch this stupid fuck's lights out for a long time.

Without giving Dominic a second to retaliate, I turned again, keeping my momentum going and changing into another reverse hook kick but only to wrap the back of my knee against his neck, closing my leg around his head and neck, and pulling his body down to the floor into a chokehold with my leg.

I slammed the rest of my weight down on top of his chest with his back flat on the ground, his neck stuck between my thigh and calf while I held his upper body down by sitting on his chest. Sounds of choking and gasping emanated from his mouth, his face red and sweaty as I continued to obstruct his airways and enjoyed the absolute fuck out of it.

His right hand attempted another measly swat at me, so I pushed my free leg out and stomped my foot down on his wrist to prevent any further struggles. He tried lifting his legs to potentially kick me in the back of my head, but I just leaned forward and laughed a little as his legs came crashing back down from exhaustion.

"I warned you," I sneered, my victory a little too intoxicating to contain. I knew I shouldn't be doing this, and I was probably going to pay for it later, but this little shit had it coming, especially for what he did to that poor girl from Katherine and Daniel's baby shower who spoke to me when she shouldn't have. I hadn't forgotten about that.

Dominic just struggled more against me, mumbling nonsense while his other hand tried to pry my legs off him. He was too tired, though, and it only made me squeeze his neck harder, causing a blood vessel to pop in his eye.

There was no way I could let him up now. If I did, by some divine miracle he might find some energy and come after me as I made my way to the door. There was no lock, so I couldn't lock him in here and run for safety. I couldn't risk it. I would have to knock him out.

"Remember this the next time you want to remind me who the fuck you think you are." And then I lifted my fist to aim it right at his face.

"Jaden!"

The anger in that voice had me stopping my fist an inch away from Dominic's nose. This whole time my heart was steady and calm ... until now.

"Let him go," Darren commanded, the authority in his baritone voice unmistakable.

But still, I didn't feel finished. I felt robbed.

"Saved by big brother," I whispered menacingly to Dominic and then released him, allowing his head to drop to the floor as I stood.

Darren wrenched the door to the cage open and stepped in while Clive and Owen remained outside the cage, holding Camaro back by her collar as she continued to bark and jump. I didn't take another step as Darren grabbed me by both arms and gave me a quick jerk, his anger radiating off him in hot waves that caused my stomach to churn.

"What the *FUCK* just happened?" he barked, his menacing gaze penetrating deep into my bones.

The volume of his ferocious voice had me having trouble finding mine.

"He ... wouldn't let me leave the cage unless I fought him."

Darren's face was incredulous. "The fuck? So, you fought him?"

"Well ... what did you expect me to do, let him hurt me? He attacked me! I had no other choice!"

He lifted his index finger and pointed at my face. "That had better be the case because if it isn't..." he warned.

"I know you'll watch the security footage. I have no reason to lie."

Darren regarded me for a few moments, the intense rage in his eyes had me biting the inside of my cheek as he looked me over, likely checking for injuries.

"Are you hurt?" he asked with an irritated groan, his eyes still scanning.

"I'm fine, but ... he's probably not," I replied, pointing at Dominic, who was trying to learn how to breathe again as he writhed on the ground.

Darren's eyes leered over to Dominic who was finally attempting to sit up and failing, his mouth set in a hard line while the muscle in his jaw clenched. The literal air around him now had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

Darren eventually cursed under his breath and released a frustrated sigh, his eyes still set on Dominic. "Go up to our room and don't come down until I tell you to," he ordered and then stepped toward Dominic.

I quickly moved away from him and headed out of the octagon, making a beeline for the exit of my gym with Clive and Owen in tow. Whatever was about to go down, I didn't want to be present for it.

I waited for Jaden to leave the gym before I addressed my shithead of a brother. Rage rushed through me like a toxin as I glared down at Dominic, my anger conflicting with my emotions. I was pissed that he thought to attack Jaden, and I was also pissed he got his ass handed to him by her. He should have been able to take her, but at the same time, she should also be able to take him. At least we now knew who the better man was.

I didn't even know what prompted the fight. All I got was a call during my weekly meeting with Clive and Owen from my security team that Jaden was fighting Dominic in her octagon. I didn't even ask for details, just sprang from my desk and rushed to her private gym with Clive and Owen running behind me to keep up. Thankfully, it was only just down the hall from my office.

I didn't trust Dominic to even sit in the same room as Jaden, let alone allow him to fight her. He was volatile, chaotic, and fortunately predictable, which was why he knew to stay the fuck away from her. So why the hell was he suddenly defying me now? I was expecting him tomorrow to discuss a new operation in Vegas, yet he decided to surprise me a day early instead.

Looking down at him as he writhed below me, I felt nothing but disgust and disappointment. He was twice Jaden's size and should have been able to handle her easily, but then again, if Jaden hadn't trained as much as I forced her to, it would likely be her I'd be looking down at right now. And then I'd fucking kill my own brother.

Family or not. You don't fuck with what's mine. Ever.

In the end, I was glad it was him and not her. Jaden was tough, but it didn't matter how much muscle she put on or how many beatings from me she could take to improve her stamina. I held back on her, but Dominic



wouldn't, which meant she would have been in a much worse state than my brother. But if he didn't look as shitty as he did now, he certainly would once I was done with him. It looked like Jaden already did most of my job for me.

I folded my arms over my chest and nudged my foot at Dominic's hip to get him to look at me.

"Get up," I ordered.

He groaned as he clutched his side before finally opening his eyes to look up at me. He then winced away once he caught the smirk on my face.

"That f-fucking bitch," he moaned.

"Watch it," I warned. "Now get up."

Dominic finally rolled to his side and slowly sat up, his hand clutching against his ribs.

"I swear to God, that fucking girl. Where the fuck did she learn all that?"

Pride swelled in my chest. "She learned it from me."

Shock and disbelief washed over Dominic's face. "What the fuck for? She's a fucking woman!"

My blood boiled at his insult. Jaden was so much more than just a *fucking woman*.

"So she can defend herself when she needs to, which she clearly needed to today."

Dominic scoffed. "I was only gonna rough her up a little. She would have been fine."

The last time Dominic "roughed" a girl up a little, she nearly died from her injuries. Not that I cared, but if Jaden had faced the same outcome, Dominic would have joined her, except he would have been in a body bag instead.

"You were gonna rough up the girl who you know belongs to me?" My voice became menacingly low. If he wasn't my brother, he'd be dead already. "You know better than to come into my house, fuck with what belongs to me, and think there won't be consequences."

Dominic finally found his strength to pull himself up and stand in front of me. "What the fuck, dude? I thought she was just some little fuck pet for you, so who the fuck cares?"

My fist landed against his face faster than I could blink, his body landing on the hard floor of the octagon. I was already on top of him,

landing more punches to his face and gut as rage ripped through my veins.

“You think she’s just some *fuck pet* to me?” I bellowed at him between hits. “You think she’s just another walking fuck toy for me? You don’t know shit, Dominic, and that’s always been your problem. You act without any fucking knowledge and gamble on everything. And now, you’ve gotten your ass beat by a little girl because, even after all the training I gave you in your teens, you still can’t fight for shit!” The blows kept coming, one after the other, my wrath boundless and wild.

Dominic didn’t say anything. It wasn’t as if I was giving him a chance to anyway, but it probably would have just ended up pissing me off in the end. He just groaned and whined like the little bitch he was, his eyes now red and swollen shut accompanied by more bruising and swelling all over his now bloody face. I couldn’t believe he was still able to run Vegas like this. He must have all his guards doing the fighting for him.

“Would you lay a hand on Daniel’s wife? Would you ever think to touch her?” I growled through each punch. When he didn’t answer, I grabbed his shirt and lifted him up. “Answer me.”

“No,” he mumbled.

“Why?”

He groaned before he made his mouth work again. “They’re married.”

“Consider Jaden’s status of equal standing,” I said and released his shirt, dropping him back to the ground. “You disrespected me today, immensely, and for that, there will be consequences. Jaden will be punished for her role in this, but if you ever touch her again or even *look* in her direction, I swear to God, I will end you. Blood or not, no one fucks with what’s mine. Do you understand?” I gave him another opportunity to answer me. When he didn’t, I grabbed his shirt again with both hands and gave him a quick shake. “Do you understand?!”

“Yes,” he finally whispered, barely even audible.

“I have half a fucking mind to pull you from Vegas right now. You could easily be replaced in several hours. Is that what you fucking want?”

“No,” he croaked.

“Then use your fucking brain the next time you decide to take it upon yourself to fuck with something that belongs to me. Got it?”

“Yes,” he mumbled.

“Good,” I seethed and dropped him back to the floor with a thud.

Leaving him there, I walked out of the cage and took out my phone to call Scott. “Have security remove Dominic from Jaden’s octagon and brought down to the infirmary. And have the tapes ready. I want to review them now.” I hung up without a response from him and headed directly to the security room where I knew Scott would be anyway.

Two guards rushed past me as I rounded the corner, punched in the security code, and walked inside.

“Your brother got his ass kicked,” Scott said with a chuckle.

“Show me,” I ordered.

Scott rewound the last twenty minutes of the tape, showing Jaden standing in the octagon, holding a foam block when Dominic walked in without her noticing. Their exchange was typical of Dominic, trying to coax Jaden into doing what he wanted, and then failing like usual. I didn’t know what pissed me off more, Dominic disrespecting Jaden or Jaden disrespecting Dominic. Neither was acceptable, but Dominic should know better than to interact with Jaden without my permission.

At least Jaden attempted to be civil in the beginning, though she could have done a much better job at de-escalating the situation. The second she told Dominic to fuck off was the official escalation. Although it probably would have turned that way eventually no matter how polite Jaden was. Dominic was like me, going after what you wanted until it was yours, except this time, he was going after the wrong fucking thing.

Jaden made him regret it. And now I had to fucking punish her for it.

Scrutinizing the fight, Jaden’s moves were lightning fast now, her strikes strong and accurate, everything precise and strategic. Dominic couldn’t touch her. No matter how much he threw at her, she’d just dodge it, maneuvering around him instead of engaging to conserve energy. She egged him on, angering him so he’d waste more energy, making mistakes and only fighting on emotion instead of staying levelheaded. She was tiring him out and doing a damn good job of it.

Her fighting skills had improved remarkably over the past year, thanks to all her training. She was sharper now, more attentive to her opponents and surroundings, and that made her an excellent opportunist in strategy. Even though she was small, she knew how to throw her own weight around so it benefitted her. After watching her master the hurakurana, I instantly pitied anyone who ever had to fight her – unless they were me.

Fighting her became one of my favorite things to do, especially now that she was better than she used to be, and after every fight, she'd learn from it and improve. She made sure to stay unpredictable like myself, but even as she tried, she still couldn't match me.

And then I'd fuck her into submission every single night.

But while her combat skills were a force to be reckoned with, it didn't distract me from the fucking smile plastered on her face as she countered every strike Dominic made. She was very clearly enjoying the fight, which explained why she didn't try that hard to stall or de-escalate. She wanted to fight him, probably loved the chance for the opportunity. And now she would get to hold it over his head forever. And that was a major fucking problem.

After the tape was finished, I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall. Dominic was going to be a child over this. He'd expect retribution, and if I chose not to punish Jaden over it, he'd consider my loyalty to him and the family compromised. And I wouldn't have that. But the fact that Dominic felt he could come into my home and fuck around with Jaden as if she were just some toy to fuck with had me fuming as well. He didn't see her as something important to me, something of value, something to be respected, cherished, and protected even though she'd been with me for nearly two years now. I couldn't have that either.

Dominic knew better than to disrespect Katherine because she was Daniel's wife. That title gave her standing in the family, a position of respect and authority, something that Jaden deserved, especially after this.

I'd been considering it for a while now, reflecting on Jaden's behavior, the improvement in her moods and her responses to me. She'd grown accustomed to my expectations of her, managing my own moods to give me exactly what I wanted when I wanted it, whether it was her submission or her defiance. She could read my needs like an open book, and sometimes I hated how attuned she was to me, how observant. I thrived on being unpredictable, yet somehow, Jaden was able to figure out exactly what the beast in me needed in certain moments.

The dominant part of me loved that I was able to train Jaden so well to be everything I could ever want or need, but the survivalist in me also saw it as a potential threat. At some point, I might need to shake things up a little, but in the end, it was what I wanted and still was. I had Jaden exactly

where I wanted her, which meant it was finally time to take it to a new level.

It was time to make Jaden my wife.

But first, she had some sins to atone for.

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I was beginning to run a pattern in the carpet from my pacing. My nerves had my blood racing faster than I could handle while my stomach was one giant knot as I waited for Darren to come get me. Because I knew he would, and I knew I was in trouble.

I couldn't have bolted from that room fast enough, my only regret leaving Camaro behind with Clive and Owen, but I needed to flee. And now that I was alone, regret and fear were all I could taste.

I should have tried harder to de-escalate the fight, but I lost my patience. I had better self-control than that, and I fucking lost it. I never do that. But Dominic was just so damn arrogant, and I couldn't stand it.

I couldn't deny how much I loved getting a piece of him, how good it felt to finally knock him on his ass, and how quickly I lost myself to the fight. It would do Dominic some serious good to be humbled for once, but I doubted he would learn anything from it. The only thing he would want would be either a rematch or retribution. And Darren would have to be the one to deliver it because I deserved it.

The only terrifying question was, how bad was it going to be?

I didn't have to wonder long because a half hour later, Darren stormed through the bedroom door, his thunderous footsteps stopping me in my tracks as he lifted his hand and struck me right across the cheek. I hit the floor before the pain even registered, the blood rushing to my face with an enormous amount of pressure radiating in my cheek. It wasn't the hardest he'd ever hit me, but it was certainly meant to leave one hell of a mark. He would want Dominic to be able to see the damage he'd done.

Before I could even recover, Darren was already reaching down for my throat to lift me and shove me against the wall, his massive body caging me in and validating the fear that was already causing me to crumble inside.

I could be so confident until he stepped into the room.

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?” he growled at me, the venom in his voice poisoning the resolve I was fighting to maintain.

With the heated rage that was emanating from his body, it took all the courage I had just to form words. “I was defending myself.”

“You were way past defending yourself. As much as I’d like to commend you for easily beating the shit out of my brother, the amount of drama I now have to deal with won’t be rectified as quickly.”

“What should I have done?” I managed to plead.

“You should have backed down! You should have de-escalated! You could have defended without striking him back. You’re conditioned enough to handle that.”

“I tried!” I nearly shouted. “I didn’t know if backup was coming! I couldn’t risk it! Did you want me to let him hurt me?”

“Of course not!” he bellowed down at me. “You know how often you’re watched. You knew someone would be there to intervene. I fucking bolted from my desk the second I was informed. Your fight lasted an entire minute. You couldn’t have stalled for one whole minute?”

Could I have stalled? I had made attempts, but they were meant to instigate, not invent more time. “I did the best I could,” I stated but knew it wouldn’t be enough.

“Do not fucking lie to me, Jaden. It wasn’t hard to see the smile plastered on your face. You wanted to fight him, and you enjoyed your victory.”

There was no way I could deny that. Of course, I enjoyed beating the shit out of that asshole. It was long overdue, and he deserved everything he got. But I doubted Darren would see it that way.

“And here I thought I wasn’t supposed to fight fair,” I was bold enough to say, throwing his words back at him.

“My family is different, and you know that. You need to learn to pick your battles better, Jaden. Not all of them have your fucking name on it.”

And with that, he ripped me away from the wall and threw me face first onto the bed with my feet digging into the carpet, his hand holding me down by the back of my neck while he tore open the back of my shirt. Fear

turned my stomach into painful knots and my pussy into molten lava as I heard him fumble with his belt buckle, the sound of the leather being pulled from the loops of his pants to being wrapped around his fist.

I remained perfectly still as he stood, knowing full well any movement would make everything worse, and gritted my teeth. That first air-splitting strike against my bare shoulder made my entire body cringe away as red-hot pain laced through my skin. It only took five more before I was screaming into the comforter, uncontrollable tears running down my face as I took what I was owed. He hadn't laid into me this hard in a while, which meant this was more than just correction. It was penance.

It wasn't until the twentieth strike that my knees finally buckled, and they hit the carpet, my body completely crumbling from the searing anguish of my entire back. My whole body was on fire, my wildly beating heart pumping battery acid through my veins as I fought to regain some semblance of my composure. But I had barely caught my breath before Darren grabbed my ponytail and lifted me back onto the bed, his free hand yanking my shorts down with ease.

No doubt he was already hard.

And no matter how much he pushed me, I would still give him what he wanted. Whether that meant taking his fist, or his belt, or his cock, I would take it because I was strong enough to withstand it now. I would walk away completely destroyed, but in the end, I would still be able to fucking walk.

I didn't have to wait long for Darren's cock to spear into me, my body prepared to accept him without resistance as my arousal eased his entry. Though I abhorred the need for that training, I didn't reject it, finding this result to be so much less painful than if I were dry from fear. I was a survivalist, after all. Sometimes you had to do things you didn't want to do, but when it came to survival, we're all willing to make sacrifices when we had no other choice.

We all had to face reality at some point.

Keeping pace, Darren slammed into me over and over again, his thick cock filling me completely while he took me in a way that was both pleasurable and absolutely terrifying. Fear was like a fucking aphrodisiac for us – the more afraid I was, the wetter I became and the harder Darren was. He fucking fed off that shit.

As his pace began to quicken, he released my ponytail and reached around to the front of my throat, pulling me back off balance and cutting off



my already precious air supply. It was almost instantaneous when the soft tremors of my orgasm starting to bloom with each deepening thrust, my core squeezing Darren's cock as a plea for release. But he would give it when he was ready and not a minute before.

In an act that could only be described as mercy, he loosened his grip on my neck, allowing the oxygen to crash back into my system and igniting the most catastrophic orgasm that left me ruined beyond the brink. I could hear him groaning over me as he came inside me, his cum coating my inner walls as he slowed to fill me up entirely.

Reaching again for my ponytail, he yanked my head back and spoke directly into my ear.

"If you thought any of that was bad, you should see my brother. I nearly fucking killed him for what he did, but that doesn't mean you're free from fault. Don't *ever* let me catch you fighting him or anyone close to me like that again, do you understand? You avoid, you dodge, and you deflect, but you never engage, is that clear?"

"Yes. I'm sorry," I whispered, wincing from the horrible tug of my hair.

He let go and stood, immediately righting himself and leaving me to wallow in my misery on the bed. "Do not leave this room for the rest of the day. I have some serious damage control to enforce," he said, and then he left, slamming the door behind him.

I laid on that bed for what felt like forever, Darren's cum now having seeped out of my pussy to dry and crust along my inner thighs, my body so inflamed with agony I found it pointless to even move. But I had to move. I had to get up. I had to take care of myself.

Gathering my strength, I grabbed my robe that hung on the hook next to the bed, gently draped it over myself, and forced my legs to bring me to the bedroom door. It wouldn't be locked, but I knew Clive and Owen would be on the other side. Sliding it open, I carefully poked my head outside to find Camaro pouting in front of the door, Owen to my left, and Clive looking down at me expectantly from the right.

"A bucket of ice, please," I croaked out as I held the door open for Camaro to trot through.

Clive immediately held up a five-gallon bucket filled to the brim with large cubes of ice and held it out to me. This was not the first time he'd been prepared for me. He knew what to expect, and I was grateful for that.

Knowing he couldn't carry the bucket in for me, I took my little gift, trying my best to hide my wince and closed the door behind me. Taking a deep breath, I slowly carried the bucket of ice into the bathroom, fighting relentlessly against the severe ache of my body. The damn thing probably only weighed ten pounds yet felt like fifty, but I could do it.

I told myself I would *fucking walk*.

Turning on the faucet, I let the cold water fill the massive tub before I reached down to lift the bucket and dump the ice into the water. Each movement caused every muscle in my body to scream in agony, each stretch of my back feeling like a brand-new strike. And for a moment, I feared Darren might have actually broken skin.

My willpower finally emptied when I slipped into the tub, the freezing cold water surrounding my entire body and stopping just above my shoulders. Bringing my knees to my chest, I hugged myself tightly, the iciness of the water doing exactly what it was meant to do: numb me from the outside in. I needed it to dull the raging fire that was still burning inside me.

Only Darren was allowed to strike that flame. He was the only one I could burn for, the only one I was allowed to scorch in return because my fire was reserved for him and him alone. I couldn't give it air, couldn't feed it with passion – that was Darren's job. I had to welcome the ice back in, to surround myself in that sweet security of detachment.

This wasn't the first ice bath I'd taken, and it wouldn't be the last. Bringing down inflammation and swelling was a necessary skill now. I'd also learned how to treat burns, repair dislocations, slow bleeding, mend fractures, construct tourniquets, cauterize, stitch, clean, and dress wounds. I was a one-woman surgeon and nurse when I needed to be, a goddamn professional, and right now was no exception. I knew my back was already destroyed so there was only so much I could do for the bruising there as well as the bruise on my face, but I could at least bring the swelling down and prevent it from getting any worse. There would still be plenty of damage for Dominic to see tomorrow.

Over the past year, I'd taken numerous beatings from Darren far worse than that. But they weren't all punishments. Most of them were meant to build my stamina, increase my pain tolerance, and develop my conditioning to a point of absolute impenetrability.

I was a machine most of the time, going through the motions of my day, doing what was required of me, and reserving all personal touches of affection and admiration for Darren. It made me a ghost in this house, especially among the staff who either ignored me or deliberately went out of their way to avoid me, the repercussions of the gardener still not lost to them. Interaction with me was a risk they weren't willing to take, and I couldn't blame them. Camaro was the only friend I could really count on.

Leaning farther down, I dipped my bruised cheek into the water, allowing the sting of the ice to ease the pressure pulsing in my cheek. I would have a nice mark there tomorrow, but it would heal eventually. I would always heal eventually. There wasn't anything I couldn't do or be when it came to Darren. Because that was my duty ... and I was fucking good at it.

Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

So I would bear what I had to. If Darren had to hurt me to make peace with his brother for the mistake I made, then that was what he had to do, and I wouldn't deny him. It was my fault either way. My goal was perfection, and I had failed.

... I deserved this.

I could take it.

I could take it.

I wasn't weak ...

I wasn't.

Two weeks had gone by since my fight with Dominic, and after an excruciatingly awkward dinner with him and Darren the next day out on the patio, I was ready to move on from the incident. It was all I could do to avoid the smug look on Dominic's face as I had to force myself to sit completely straight to prevent my back from touching the chair. Although he really didn't have much to smile about. His face alone looked ten times worse than my back did.

Even though I'd received harsh backlash on my end, it didn't go unnoticed that even though Darren had sought retribution for his brother, he had also sought it on my behalf as well, and clearly, I was the favored victor in that little match even if Dominic wouldn't admit it. I chose to embrace that favor, no matter how absurd it had been achieved or conveyed.

After Dominic went back to Vegas, I'd given myself two days rest from my training, choosing to brush up on some of my language studies. I'd been dabbling in a little German and Spanish when I could. And when I felt well enough to return to my gym, I focused on stretching and running, rather than heavy lifting or combat. Within the span of a week, I was back to my usual self, my transgressions forgiven, and my mind finally at ease. The bruises would still be visible for another week because of my pale skin, but they didn't really bother me anymore.

They still bothered Darren, though. Every time he looked at me, his eyes couldn't help but linger on the faded yellow green bruise on my cheek, rekindling the guilt within my stomach. I tried to avoid him so he wouldn't have to see it. But that would only work for so long.

"Jaden," Owen called from across my paint studio. I was in the middle of finishing another finger painting of a birch tree in the winter when I

looked up to acknowledge him. “He wants you in his office.”

I nodded and stood, heading for the sink to clean myself off before putting away my tools and supplies. Hanging up my apron, I smoothed my black T-shirt dress down, fluffed my hair, called for Camaro, and made my way toward Darren’s office.

Two guards stood on either side of the double doors, nodding at me and opening the door so I could enter. “Camaro stays,” the one who opened the door for me said.

I turned back to Camaro. “Stay, pretty girl,” I ordered softly, and she immediately sat back on her hind legs to wait for me. Walking forward, I left her outside as the guard closed the door behind me, the subtle click causing my stomach to knot. I didn’t know why. I’d been in here a handful of times.

Darren’s office was probably the size of his bedroom, the colossal space filled with a giant desk fit for a conglomerate crime lord that faced the wall of windows revealing the entire backyard and the expanse of the ocean. A long heavy mahogany table took up the space of the hardwood flooring just in front of the windows that could easily seat twelve while a seating arrangement of black leather couches, chairs, a plush burgundy rug, and a glass coffee table were set in front of the immense dark marble fireplace. The wet bar was just to the left of the fireplace. Complete with a small sink and towel rack, the crystal decanters sat on the black marble countertop, half filled with clear and brown liquids with several glass tumblers lined up for use. Shelves upon shelves of books layered the dark navy-blue walls while tiered chandeliers lit the shadows where the sun couldn’t reach.

Each piece of the room had been intricately chosen and strategically placed, including the frames decorating the wall directly behind Darren’s desk. He had four of my finger paintings, those he claimed to be his favorites, hung up in a row behind him so he could admire them whenever he wanted. A few of my other ones had been scattered around the house for all to see and admire. I had learned to let go of the meaning of pride a long time ago, but seeing those paintings on his wall brought a little warmth to my chest.

Darren’s appreciation was a luxury I clung to.

But my paintings weren’t hanging alone. They were actually accompanied by several framed photographs of me in candid shots. Three of them were me smiling as I played with Camaro, another my face serious

and focused as I jogged across the beach, and another with my face relaxed as I stared off at a sunset, my hair so red from the glow of the sun it looked like goddamn fire.

With soft steps, I made my way toward Darren who was sitting behind his desk watching something on his computer screen. With his eyes narrowed, that focused steel look of his told me that some very heinous decisions were being made inside his head right then.

Glancing down at his desk in honest curiosity, my eyes landed on several pieces of paper that were laid out in order, most of them looking like invoices. But one invoice at the top of the pile caught my eye due to the sheer size of the bill, making my eyes widen. It was addressed to Darren's company Triguard, and judging by the itemizations listed, it looked like it was for a server farm run by a company called Digital Frontiers. No wonder it was so damn expensive.

"Have a seat, Jaden," Darren suddenly said with a nod toward the conference table, my breath instantly catching in my throat.

Quickly backing away from my transgressions, I pulled out a chair and stiffly sat down, my eyes focused on the expansive rug at my feet.

It was only maybe thirty agonizing seconds later that the double doors swung back open, and Hagen, the sheriff of the small town we actually lived in, and three of his officers dragged in a man by the back of his shirt, stopping in the center of the room.

"How's that now, ya little fuck!" Hagen shouted at the man as he stood over him. The rest of the officers and three more of Darren's guards, including Scott, stood around him.

Staying in my seat, I crossed my legs and gave Darren a *what the fuck* look, but all he did was smirk and stand from his desk chair, removing his grey suit jacket and catching Hagen's attention. I didn't need much more explanation than that. I was simply here for the show.

Another training lesson to dull my sensitivities.

*Fuck.*

"Took me a minute, but I finally got the fucker," Hagen said as he pointed at the man who stood silent in the center of the room.

As I took in his appearance, he didn't really look as scared as I expected him to be. He wasn't very tall, maybe five foot eight, probably one hundred and eighty pounds of mostly fat, small chin, thin lips, dark hair that covered more than just his head. He wore a baggy black T-shirt and gym shorts with

dirty white tennis shoes. His body was clearly out of shape, and his hygiene was incredibly lacking since I could smell him from where I sat.

But the look on his face was one of scorn rather than fear.

This was new.

“Where did you find him?” Darren asked, that deep voice silencing all movement in the room as he slowly rounded the desk, that predatory gait of his making the hairs on my arm stand up. The mood in the room became suddenly clear as my stomach solidified to prepare for it.

Things were about to get really messy.

“Caught the fucker just as he was about to jump out the damn window!” Hagen replied before turning back to the man. “Not so slick now, are ya, boy!”

He turned his face away from the spittle that shot from Hagen’s mouth, his gaze suddenly landing on me as if he’d just now noticed I’d been sitting there the whole time. His eyes lit up as they quickly moved up and down my frame, his mouth parting slightly, far too obvious for everyone not to notice. I slightly shook my head at him, keeping my face passive before Hagen smacked him at the back of the head.

“Don’t you look at her, you murderous little fuck!” Hagen shouted. “You keep your eyes forward!”

*Murderous. What a joke. Kettle meet pot.*

Darren’s eyes settled on the man as he assessed him all the way down to the way he tied his shoes, but I could already sense the disapproval in his blank expression. And then a little evil grin curved up the side of his lips when the man didn’t immediately cower before him.

“What’s your name?” Darren asked him, his tone low but encouraging.

The man was silent for a moment before he answered. “Dennis.”

*Poor Dennis.*

“So, Dennis, how did it feel?”

Dennis’s brows knitted together in confusion. “How did what feel?”

Darren took a menacing step toward him.

“When you sliced open their bodies just to mangle in their organs. When you cut the hair from their heads to stuff it in their mouths. When you carved ‘whore’ into their chests. When the blood coated your hands. When you watched the life leave their eyes. How did it feel?”

Jesus. If all of that was true, then the dude was clearly a goddamn psychopath. His victims must have been employees of Darren’s somewhere.

Otherwise, why bring him in for this strange interrogation?

Dennis was silent for a moment as the signals in his brain tried to process the answer that was demanded. Until he finally found it, his voice far more confident than I preferred.

“Like they deserved it,” he answered, looking straight into Darren’s eyes.

“Why did they deserve it?” Darren asked, genuinely interested.

“Because they lied when they said they loved me.”

I almost rolled my eyes. *Jesus, Sid would have a field day with this guy.*

“Whores are paid to lie,” Darren answered.

I focused on keeping my face blank at that revelation. So he was killing the women Darren continued to traffic through his many brothels.

Just the thought of the entire thing sent a new wave of fresh, heated anger over my body. I wished with every fiber of my being that Darren would end his assault against young women all over the country, but the harsh, awful reality was it would never change, no matter how much I begged or pleaded with him. And every time I thought about it, my heart would just shatter all over again, so I was grateful that he at least kept me out of the loop of that side of his business. Until now.

“Well, I didn’t want them to.”

“Then why would you ask such a stupid question?”

Dennis actually looked hurt from Darren’s question, shocked at the audacity of pointing out the flaw in his logic.

“Looking for love isn’t stupid,” he argued, his tone incredibly serious.

“It is if you’re looking for it at a brothel,” Darren answered, causing some of the officers and guards to snicker and chuckle in response.

Dennis scowled at him. “Maybe it is, but maybe I don’t care. Those women would be lucky to have me anyway. I would take care of them for the rest of their lives.”

Darren scoffed. “Judging by what you did to the last six, I doubt the rest of their lives would last more than a few hours.”

“’Cuz ya fucking slaughtered them, ya disgusting animal!” Hagen bellowed again. “Do you know what kind of havoc you’ve been creating for us over the last few weeks!”

I looked at him confused. Did he not know what Darren did to people on the daily?



“Hagen, settle down,” Darren said calmly. “You did good finding him and bringing him to me. Now let me deal with him.”

Hagen shut his mouth while Dennis cocked his head in confusion. “Deal with me how? They’re just whores, so what’s the big deal?”

I think everyone in that room heard my knuckles crack from that comment. Darren’s eyes caught mine, and even though I kept my face passive, he could see the barely contained rage blistering inside. And he loved to edge me like this.

“The big deal, Dennis, is that your actions have cost me six whores, which means I now have to spend more money to acquire their replacements. Unless you’ve got \$1.2 million dollars hiding somewhere in a bank account to cover my losses?”

Dennis’s eyes went wide. “I don’t have that kind of money!”

“I’m fully aware,” Darren replied.

“So then what do you want from me?” Dennis asked, the volume in his voice growing hysterical. Was he really this dense?

“Well, Dennis, I obviously can’t allow you to continue going from brothel to brothel killing my whores like they’re expendable. So you tell me how we rectify this situation?”

It was almost comical the way Darren was toying with this guy, like a cat playing with a mouse before it crushed it. He knew damn well how he was going to rectify the situation, he just wanted to watch Dennis desperately bounce around in the dark for the hope he wouldn’t find.

“Okay, o-okay, I won’t do it anymore. I’ll stay away from the brothels,” Dennis offered, as if that would somehow make everything all right.

Darren shook his head with a sinister look on his face. “That’s not enough, Dennis. You cost me money and lives. And you clearly don’t have any money, so the only thing left is your life.”

He then snapped his fingers, and the guards behind Dennis removed a large plastic sheet from one of the cabinet drawers and laid it out on the floor. As Darren removed his cufflinks and began to roll up the sleeves of his white dress shirt, suddenly everything snapped into perspective for Dennis as he was dragged over onto the plastic.

“Wait! Wait! You don’t have to kill me! I’ll stop! I’m promise! I won’t do it again! I’m sorry!”

Darren shook his head. “It’s too late for apologies, Dennis. Our actions have consequences. It’s time for you to face yours.”

Dennis suddenly looked over at me, his face awash with desperation as he leaned forward. "Don't let him do this. Please! Help me!"

I raised my brows in shock, his attempt to gain sympathy from me just as pathetic as his ego. "You expect me to help you after you massacred six innocent women?"

He recoiled as if I had slapped him. "They weren't innocent. They were filthy fucking whores!" Dennis argued.

It took significant effort not to get up and immediately rip his tongue out, but I just clenched my jaw in fury instead. Those women were not whores. They were slaves.

I would fucking know.

"Well, then it must really suck knowing you're about to die for those filthy fucking whores, huh?" I countered.

Dennis scowled at me. "Fuck you, you stupid cunt. You're probably just another whore too!"

*Idiot.*

I sneered at him then and shook my head, knowing he had just invited himself to a world of pain. Darren would not take to the insult lightly because the look he was currently giving Dennis had my stomach already preparing for the worst. Grabbing something from his desk, he held up a pair of pliers and made his way toward Dennis.

"Hold his mouth open," he ordered.

Two guards and one officer immediately grasped Dennis, holding his jaw tightly and prying it open as he struggled and screamed.

"No! No!" he shouted, but his protests were quickly cut off when Darren caught his tongue with the pliers and pulled out a butterfly knife from his pants pocket. Dennis's screams echoed through the office as his tongue was cut from his mouth and held up for him to see. My stomach instantly recoiled as blood coated Dennis's mouth and dribbled onto the floor, but the misery in his face was nothing but satisfaction to me as Darren carelessly tossed the useless organ onto the plastic sheet. He then grabbed Dennis's jaw in a harsh grip, his blood dripping all over Darren's hand, and spoke to him in a low dangerous voice.

"No one, and I mean *no one*, talks to her like that and walks away intact."

It only took Darren maybe three minutes to slice into Dennis in every painful possible way, his screams only encouraging Darren to continue just

to see how long he could make him last. Mercy was finally granted when Darren slowly grazed the knife across his throat, allowing Dennis to fall back onto the plastic sheet, his blood splashing in puddles where he fell.

When Darren walked away from his body, the guards immediately rolled up the plastic with Dennis inside like complete professionals and removed him from the room, the area where the plastic had been now appearing as if someone hadn't just been brutally murdered right there. And though my stomach still squirmed from Darren's grotesque methods of retribution, my conscious did nothing but applaud him.

The feeling didn't last long because the reality of it was if Darren hadn't had those women trafficked to begin with, they never would have encountered someone as fucked up as Dennis. The only silver lining was at least there was one less scumbag walking the earth.

"Thanks for your help, Hagen," Darren acknowledged him as he rinsed off his hands and forearms in the sink of the wet bar.

"My pleasure," he replied enthusiastically and turned to his officers. "Let's go, boys."

When everyone cleared the room, the air shifted into something heady as Darren slowly approached me, his predatory gaze inflaming a need in me to sooth the beast that was still very clearly wanting. Fresh blood speckled his white dress shirt, along with parts of his face and neck, but I knew he wasn't bothered by any of it. And to be honest, neither was I.

And now that he was done with his kill, satisfying his blood lust, I knew exactly what urge he would need to satiate next. The look in his eye as he inspected me up and down confirmed as much, so I simply stood from my seat and waited.

When his hand snapped out to grab my lower jaw, I didn't even react. Just ignored the butterflies that exploded in my stomach as Darren yanked my face to his so he could kiss me the way he liked – viciously.

With his tongue invading my mouth and my breath lost, an all too familiar pressure began to form between my legs, heating up fast. My hands found themselves grasping onto his belt, needing something to grip without giving too much away. With one hand still clenching my jaw, Darren's other pressed against my lower back until the rock-hard bulge in his pants was pushing against my stomach.

There was no denying the aggression in his kiss, and I recognized immediately what this was going to lead to – rough sex and lots and lots of

bruises.

On a growl, Darren took my hips in his hands and lifted me over his shoulder. I didn't protest as he turned and made his way out of his office, heading toward the stairs, but my eyes were fixed on my dog as she began to follow when she saw us.

"Stay, Camaro," we both ordered at the same time, and Camaro sat her annoyingly obedient ass right down, not moving an inch, even when we disappeared from her sight. Clive and Owen were her caretakers when I was otherwise preoccupied, so she knew to stay with them.

Attempting to adjust myself over Darren's solid meaty shoulder, he kept my movements to a minimum, his hand tight against the back of my knees to prevent me from climbing him like I did my jungle gym.

When we got to his bedroom, Darren kicked the door shut behind him and nearly flung me off his shoulder, tossing me on the bed like a fucking rag doll. That pissed me off.

Falling with the momentum of his toss, I rolled backward into a somersault so I was now facing him on the bed, my knees pressing into the mattress, ready for evasive maneuvers.

Darren shoulders squared, his stare trained right at me, those eyes revealing everything that I needed to know. He didn't just want to fuck me; he wanted to fight fuck me. This was going to be a long and brutal night, but I would give the fucker what he wanted. He was just obviously going to have to fight me for it.

"Does someone want to play?" I drawled, taunting him the way he needed me to.

He responded with that damn evil smirk that was both terrifying and sexy as fuck. And then he started to remove his ruined, bloodied dress shirt, revealing all that dangerous hard lean muscle underneath. So much unbridled strength harbored inside that body, the breadth of his capabilities an endless uncertainty that never ceased to terrorize me.

He was going to ruin me tonight.

Dropping the shirt to the floor, Darren cocked his head to the side, regarding me closely while the predator in him begged to be released all over again. Just seeing him standing there with all that incredibly toned muscle was enough to intimidate me. He was so fucking big, it was a wonder I was able to measure up to him at all. It was so easy for him to destroy me, but he enjoyed the cat and mouse games too damn much.

“You’re encouraging a dangerous game, little girl.”

His voice was laced with the calming venom that spoke to me in volumes, promising to poison me with terror and humiliation if I wasn’t careful. But I knew what I was doing. I was a fucking pro at this now.

I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders in anticipation, my fingers spreading over the covers of the bed to give me better mobility when the time came.

“But it’s your favorite game.” I snickered, a fresh smirk on my lips.

I could feel the tension in the air, thick with lust and primal retribution for my taunts. Adrenaline was already beginning to pump through my veins in anticipation. I was going to be so fucking sore in the morning, but I’d satisfy the shit out of him first.

Darren loved to fight me, drain me of the stamina that could never match his, force me into submission, and then fuck me until dawn. There were days when I craved it, and days when it got old. Either way, I hadn’t much choice in the matter. Darren was a conqueror, and if I didn’t give the wolf something to hunt and devour, I would suffer far worse in the end. When it came down to it, it was all about keeping the beast satisfied. And I was a fucking boss at it.

Darren’s mouth curved into that little shark-like grin I loved and hated.

“Remind me why that is,” he sneered. Cracking his neck, he charged for me like the damn tank he was.

Darren might have been bigger and stronger, but in the past few months, I’d become so much faster. By the time his hand snaked out for my arm, I’d already dodged him, shifting my body to the side and striking his cheek with my fist, my knuckles stinging from the impact. Not even reacting to my direct hit, Darren snatched my wrist on my retreat, gripping painfully hard and yanking me forward to pull me under him.

I allowed it just long enough for me to wrap my legs around his neck and squeeze with everything I had. Before his face started to turn red, he expertly rolled us off the bed and onto the floor, breaking the lock of my legs just enough for him to escape. I didn’t wait long for his retribution. Kicking him straight in the chest with both feet, he fell back as I rolled backward from the carpet into a standing position.

My breathing was already heavy and my wrist ached from his grip, but it was quickly forgotten as I watched Darren rise to his full height, his breathing perfectly normal as his eyes centered on me. The smirk on his

face said everything I needed to know. He was enjoying himself. But then again, with my adrenaline high, so was I.

One step was all it took for him to reach me, his fist aimed for my face, but I dodged, moving my body to the side with a single step and bringing my arm up to deflect. I countered with my own strike to his throat, which he blocked easily.

We bantered back and forth like that for a few seconds, blocking, dodging, counterstriking, and I fucking hated how much Darren was pulling his punches. He didn't like to see bruises on my face, so he would pull back just enough if he knew I wouldn't be able to block it in time. It was the biggest sting to my ego, but at the same time, I couldn't help but appreciate his sense of control.

After he threw a quick hook punch, I ducked forward and punched him right in the gut. His frame was so fucking solid I was sure the punch hurt my hand more than it did him, so I reared my back leg up into a scorpion kick almost hitting him in the chin, but he shifted just in time for my foot to land against his shoulder. Only I didn't expect him to grab my foot and keep it there.

It was the most awkward and uncomfortable position I'd ever been in. Bent over on one leg while the other was restrained above my head against Darren's shoulder. I could hear him chuckling above me.

"Still wanna keep using scorpion kicks on me?" he asked.

With only one possible move left, I quickly gripped his groin and squeezed hard enough to make him growl and release my foot so he could claim my wrists instead, yanking me up from my position.

"You're just jealous because you can't do them," I countered as he squeezed my wrists painfully tight, causing me to wince. Ignoring my fight for the freedom of my wrists, Darren moved us steadily back toward the bed until my backside was suddenly slammed against the mattress, partially knocking the wind out of me. It allowed Darren the easy opportunity to pry my legs open so he could fit himself between them and sneer down at me.

"I don't need to use scorpion kicks when I'm always the tallest one in the room." He snickered. Leaning down to my ear, he taunted me with a cruel whisper. "I bend to no one."

Fucker knew just the right buttons to push.

As quickly as I could, I reared my knees up to dig my heels into his hips and push him away, but he already knew exactly what I was doing and

extended his elbows back to prevent me from getting the reach I needed. But that was fine because he was now at the perfect angle for my next move.

Jolting my head forward, I crashed it into his nose, causing him to jerk back with a grunt. That gave me just the few inches I needed to shift my hips just slightly so my heels could return to Darren's hips and push him away until I was free.

"Funny how quickly someone can bend from a head butt," I sneered as I stood from the bed, but then suddenly realized the mistake I'd just made with my final taunt.

Luckily, I hadn't caused his nose to bleed, but the look on his face, that look he gave all his victims before he was about to torture them to death was staring at me right in the face. And then he smiled. It made my heart plummet to my stomach while the knots tore away at my insides. Panic began to ensue in place of the adrenaline that had been coursing through me, and I felt myself begin to tremble.

Playful Darren was nearly gone.

Standing only a few feet away from the bed, I didn't have much room to move out of the way when his hand snatched my throat, turned, and threw me to the floor. Pushing through the choking pain of his grip, I twisted just enough that I was able to roll up my shoulder, and continue my momentum into a front cartwheel to maintain some distance from him. But by the time I came to a full standing, I was nearly up against the wall, which he took full advantage of.

Pressing into my collarbone, Darren slammed me against the wall, his grip moving north to restrict not only my air flow, but all bodily function. My hands instantly went for his thumb and fingers to try to pry his vise of a hand off me, but that only encouraged him to grip tighter. Tears burst from my eyes from the pressure and slipped down my cheeks, making a point to fall on his wrist.

With my nails finding their way to claw at his arm, my legs suddenly remembered they still worked, attempting to either kick him or at the very least the wall so I could move some. But that only encouraged him to lift me by my neck and force himself between my thighs, widening his stance so my legs dangled on either side of him. I barely had the strength to even move them.

Desperation called for my fists to strike out, slamming my knuckles right into Darren's cheek. Pain burst through my hand, but it did nothing, like he hadn't even registered that I'd hit him. I quickly reared back and tried my elbow instead, and though his head only jerked a centimeter, still nothing. I tried one last strike, but Darren reached up and grabbed my wrist with his free hand, slamming it back into the wall. Pain shot through my hand and down my wrist, and no matter how much I tugged and pulled, there was no slipping free of his grasp.

"Darren, please," I croaked, pressing harder on his wrist as the room began to blur and a wave of dizziness overtook me.

"Begging now?" he asked with a sneer as he released my wrist to unzip his pants.

Grasping my workout shorts, he yanked the fabric with one good tug, ripping it apart right down the center. Pulling my thong to the side, he speared right through the wetness that I hadn't even noticed was already seeping through my clothing. I cried out from the violent contact, pain and pleasure molding together to create the unrelenting reminder of who I belonged to.

With me now spiked on top of his dick, Darren released some of the pressure on my throat. With the force of his cock plunging inside me and that first full breath, it was one of the most euphoric experiences Darren had ever forced on me. I fucking hated him for it.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, he fucked me against the wall like that until I could barely hold my legs up anymore, the pleasure too damn good to focus on anything else. He'd then taken me to the floor, burying my face into the carpet while he entered me from behind, his fingers digging into my hips and guaranteeing the bruises I would end up counting tomorrow. With my impending orgasm about to push me over the edge, Darren grabbed my hair and yanked my head back, his mouth nipping at my ear.

"Scream it," he ordered and then sank his teeth deep into my shoulder. His thrusts increased tenfold, giving me exactly what I needed to shove me right over the edge. And like the damn good dirty girl I was, I fucking screamed so loud I was sure the whole house could hear it. Just the way he liked it.

Eventually, we somehow ended up back on the bed, his arms wrapped around me while I straddled him, taking from him almost as much as he



was giving to me. His other hand found its way into my hair, gripping it tightly against the back of my head and yanking hard. Loving the sound of the gasp that escaped me, Darren growled as his lips kissed across my throat, his thrusting easing to a slow, hard pace as he teased me with every inch.

My hands clung to his shoulders as my nails bit into his skin, promising to leave my own marks for tomorrow – marks he'd wear proudly. I could feel my second orgasm beginning to blossom, my own thrusts increasing to gain the friction I wanted. But Darren controlled the pace, his hands scouring every inch of my skin, his lips claiming anything and everything he wanted.

I couldn't ignore the sense of desperation in the way he touched me, and the look of longing in his eyes. There was more than just desire tonight, more than just passion. There was some kind of distressed need coming off him in waves, and I had no idea where it was coming from. I expected his brutality with Dennis to continue with me, as it usually did after such a violent kill, but it seemed his attention had shifted.

"Fuck," he grunted, and then turned us so I was flat on my back while he kneeled over me to readjust. When he found a position he liked, he leaned down and thrust forward, sending several moans from my mouth until he quieted them with his lips. "Look at me," he demanded after leaving me breathless, forcing me to raise my heavy eyelids to comply. "Tell me you're mine." That dark tone of voice, the one laced with authority sent a deep shiver up my spine, reminding me of my wicked truth.

"I'm yours, Darren," I whispered, ignoring the taste of poison in my mouth. Even to this day, I still hated repeating those words, the ones that left me no better than a fucking trophy.

Darren closed his eyes, savoring my words as an evil smirk formed on his lips. Snatching my wrists and pinning them above my head, he increased his thrusts again, his cock aiming right for my G-spot and sending me into a tailspin of overwhelming pleasure. And then he said the one thing that shattered every inch of me.

"I'm going to make those words true to the rest of the world. No more waiting, princess. It's time to make you my fucking queen," he rumbled, his voice laced with that dark conviction that made me tremble. "Before the month is over, I'm making you my wife. Now, come for me."

The orgasm hit me just as hard as his words did, my back arching as I moaned through every single wave of pleasure until every muscle was limp with exhaustion. Darren came only seconds later, emptying himself into me before collapsing on top of me.

Momentarily satisfied, Darren rolled us again so that he was on his back, his cock still deep inside me as I straddled him, my face lying against his heaving chest as I caught my breath. My wrists ached from his grip, my thighs burning from their strain while my scalp tingled from all the hair pulling.

But the revelation he'd just proclaimed did nothing to slow my racing heart. I knew this day would come. I'd dreaded it ever since Darren revealed his agenda to me in the very beginning of my captivity. There was never any way of getting around it, and now that it was here, I needed to handle it the way I was meant to.

I would become Darren's wife before the end of the month. Fuck.

*But not with that shitty ass proposal.*

Bold confidence found its way through my bloodstream, reminding me that if I was to become Darren's wife, I needed to deserve that title – which meant I had to demand my coronation.

Sitting up, I looked down at the man I unconditionally hated, the man who tormented me, the man who controlled virtually every aspect of my life, the man who I had just watched slaughter another man right before my eyes, the man I would one day destroy, and demanded what I deserved.

"Ask me," I said, finding it suddenly harder to breathe than it already was.

Darren raised a brow, his lips forming a tight line, and draining almost all my confidence. "What?"

"Ask me," I repeated. "Just this once. For me. Please."

His eyes narrowed almost like he was annoyed, but though the hardness stayed, his eyes softened just enough to notice. But then his upper body launched forward, fear jolting my limbs from his speed just as both his hands grasped either side of my jaw, holding me tightly and trapping me in place. The constriction of movement wasn't lost on me as my hands gently wrapped around the bulk of his tattooed forearms, my gaze pleading with him to concede just this once. And by some divine miracle, he granted my request.

"Will you marry me, Jaden."

It was phrased like a question, but it wasn't spoken like one. The warning in his voice was evident, but it was the best I was going to get.

"Yes," I whispered, ignoring the painful lump in my throat as I accepted what I couldn't change.

Noticing the swell of his chest as he took in breath, Darren's hands remained in place as he pulled me toward him and kissed me with an all-consuming passion. My fingers slid from his forearms up to dig into his shoulders in an attempt to keep myself from releasing the tears that were rioting to get out.

For a year, I'd felt absolutely nothing. Blind, deaf, and dumb to emotions that served no purpose other than to remind me of all the things I needed to forget. I welcomed the cold, basked in apathy, and lived for the silence in my head. And in less than five minutes, Darren took a sledgehammer to the cemented resolve surrounding my heart and fucking shattered it.

"Stay with me," he whispered, pulling me back from the depths that would surely ruin his moment.

Darren flipped us over and stayed buried deep inside me. Gripping my wrists, he pinned them above my head before slipping his hand under the pillow and then reached back for my left hand. He removed the infinity ring that had remained faithfully on my finger since he assigned it there and replaced it with something cold and very heavy in its stead. I couldn't help but clench my fist as my chest burned something fierce, my gut twisting in alarm.

Darren continued to fuck me well into the night. He was insatiable, high off the delight of his conquest, and being a straight up fucking caveman about it. His hands interweaved with mine, pressing the ring deeper into my skin. I'd said 'yes' to this because I knew the option for 'no' didn't exist, but I still wanted the ability to say the damn word, no matter how insignificant it was.

It wasn't until hours later that he was finally satisfied. With four orgasms on my plate and three on his, we were both satiated for the night. While Darren lay next to me in bed, sleeping without a care in the world, I focused on breathing through the pain of my aching and destroyed body. My shoulders were strained, my thigh muscles stiff, my voice hoarse, and my body completely drained. And even through all that, I managed to sit up, clutching my knees for support and turn to stare down at Darren.

He was so beautiful to look at – perfectly masculine features pleasing beneath a rugged face. That dark sandy brown hair fell over his brow, tempting me to run my hands through it while that square jaw almost always remained in a hard line. Each muscle in his body was carefully toned to perfection beneath a roadmap of scars and tattooed skin – the ultimate indestructible killing machine.

His right cheek was sporting a dull red mark from my knuckles, but it wouldn't bother him. Even with the marks, he was a gorgeous specimen of a man ... until you met the monster underneath all the pretty packaging. Within a few seconds of merely looking at him, the echoes of past screams began to haunt my ears again.

The memory of his cruelty on others was a constant plague in my mind, and I wanted so badly to forget, to pretend there was a good man somewhere inside him, but he'd proven time and time again that no such man existed. And he did so on purpose so I would always remember exactly who owned me. I knew what he was and what he wasn't, and there would be no hope or desire for change. And now, I had agreed to marry him.

Fuck.

Slipping my left hand into the moonlight that spilled from the window, my new chain to Darren was revealed. And it took my breath away. A band of white gold lined my finger while a massive princess cut diamond stood out front and center. The thing must be at least ten carats. Flanking the center diamond were two more princess cut diamonds, one smaller than the other. The edges of each stone were so sharp it looked like a damn weapon.

I had a diamond brass knuckle for an engagement ring. Go figure.

Darren's lips tickled the side of my face and neck, forcing me to wake and immediately groan in frustration. I was not ready to wake up; my nightmares always stole my sleep from me.

My entire body protested with exhaustion from the strain of last night, but it was worth it in the end if Darren was satisfied. Swatting at the annoyance on my face, my wrist was snatched and pressed into the mattress.

"Wake up, Jaden." Darren's voice was soft and surprisingly patient, but I still wasn't ready.

"It's too early," I whined, turning my face into the pillow to hide my eyes from the sunlight. Darren chuckled as he began to leave a trail of kisses up my bare arm to my shoulder. At least he was in a good mood this morning.

"I've let you sleep in long enough, Jaden. Now, come on, before I let Camaro in here to wake you."

If Darren let Camaro in to wake me, that meant she'd jump all over me and the bed and lick my face or bite my hips until I rose. His threat was hollow, though. These were new sheets, and I knew he liked them.

"I would, but I think I must be paralyzed," I groaned against the pillow, my eyes still refusing to open. "Can't seem to move my legs. Guess I'll just have to stay here."

Darren's palm smacked against my bare ass, jolting me and sending a wave of pain over my entire body, reminding me of all the damage he'd done last night.

"You felt that one." He snickered. "Paralysis seems unlikely."

I just groaned in response, silently appreciating his playfulness.

“You have until the count of three to get your ass out of bed before I drag you out of it,” he threatened. His voice was stern, but there was still an edge of humor to it. He was too fucking happy to be mad at me. So I groaned again to encourage the game.

“One ...” he started, but I still didn’t move. “Two ...” His voice became darker. I popped my eyes open and glared right at him. He stared back at me with that daring, warning gaze of his that promised trouble if I didn’t comply. In that one little glance, despite the slight bruising on his right cheek, it was hard not to appreciate how good he looked in the morning light when he was freshly showered and dressed. Clad in a dark gray suit, white dress shirt with a few buttons open, and no tie, he was perfection to the core ... on the outside.

Forcing myself to move my heavy lower body, I winced at the ache in my neck and shoulders. “You know, after a night like—”

“Three,” he suddenly said and grabbed me from under my arms to haul me over his shoulders.

“Hey! I was up!” I shouted as I tried to shift into a more comfortable position over his bulky ass shoulder.

“Ass *out* of bed was the condition you failed to meet, princess,” he said as he headed toward the bathroom.

“Sorry I’m on the struggle bus this morning,” I grumbled as he set me down in front of the sink. “Some asshole kept me up all night.”

Another hard smack came at my ass, but I fought the wince.

“Watch your mouth and brush your teeth,” he ordered as he moved to turn on the shower for me.

I did as he said, brushing my teeth quickly before rubbing the sleep from my swollen eyelids. That was when I really noticed the strain in every muscle, the stiffness and exhaustion that plagued my entire body, and even though I knew I shouldn’t look in the full-length mirror, I did anyway with sheer disdain.

Just as I suspected, my inner thighs were slightly bruised, speckled bruising over my hips, my wrists were red and yellow, and a large red and purple ring adorned itself across my throat, my diamond studded collar doing nothing to mute the attention. And sparkling to my left was my giant engagement ring sitting between bruised knuckles. Disappointment made my shoulders hunch.

Was this the price I had to pay?

Darren appeared behind me, his reflection dwarfing mine as he placed his hands on my hips and pulled me against him. He leaned down to bury his nose in my hair before kissing my temple. My gut clenched as I swallowed back the lump in my throat. Darren was smiling at my bruised reflection as though he was proud of it.

My diamond studded cuffs and collar still remained over my wrists, ankles, and throat, making me feel trapped in my own bruised and damaged body.

“Are you proud of this?” I asked boldly, staring right at him through the mirror.

He turned away and ran his nose through my hair again. “I’m proud of the fact that you’re still standing,” he said, his fingertip now tracing his scarred initials in my backside. “It’s why you’re wearing my ring.”

*Lucky me.*

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“I believe congratulations are in order,” Clive said while I had my breakfast alone.

“Yes, I see Mr. Davis spared no expense on your engagement ring,” Owen chimed in enthusiastically.

I chewed my French toast and glanced down at my ring. Now that it was in the natural light, I got a better look at all the details. The ring was beautiful but absolutely obnoxious. It was too damn big, and I had already knocked it against the table twice since sitting down. I had a feeling, though, if I punched someone in the face, there’s no way I wouldn’t accidentally cut their cheek open. Or maybe that was the point?

“Thanks. You guys wanna be my bridesmaids?” I asked as I went back to my breakfast. “Or maybe I should have you both duke it out for the Maid of Honor position. What do you think?”

They both scoffed. Didn’t think so.

Last night had been a shock. After repressing my emotions for so long, the turmoil that kept returning to my gut every time my eyes caught a glimpse of my ring was becoming rather annoying.

I’d known this was coming all along. I should consider it an achievement for making it this far, for Darren finally deciding I was ready. What I didn’t expect was the anxiety that came with it. What made him

want to marry me now? What changed? Was I finally fucked up enough for him to see me as wife material? Did this mean he loved me or something?

I scoffed at the idea.

Darren did not love me. I would not allow myself to be so naïve. And I sure as fuck didn't love him. I knew the difference between love and conditioned responses. Because once upon a time, I'd been in love. Real love. And now that love was hopeless and safely locked away in my memories where Darren couldn't find them.

Hurt panged at my heart as Jason came to view. A wave of nausea washed over me, a classic response to my betrayal to Darren for even thinking of Jason. But I couldn't help but wish it was his ring on my finger right now. It should be him I got to walk down the aisle to.

It should be him. It should always have been him.

I felt the lump growing in my throat again. I missed Jason so fucking much it was killing me. I managed to forget him most of the time, but he was never that far away. Neither were my mother and younger brothers. I couldn't help but wonder if Darren was still hunting them. If Jason was taking care of them. Would Darren tell me if something happened? I had a feeling his ego would never let me live it down. And that scared the shit out of me.

Though I didn't hold my engagement with high regard, I should consider this a win. Darren was moving our relationship forward for a reason. He must feel like I was somehow wife material, which meant I'd officially knocked down one of the many walls guarding him. That was definitely a tally for my scoreboard.

But with the prospect of becoming Darren's wife, the situation was now changing, and I needed to figure out the next step in my plan. Would things be different now? Did I have new expectations? For some reason, I doubted anything would really change. I'd still be locked away from the world, unable to come and go as I please, and still be forced to worship Darren to ensure my survival. What a lucky wife I was to be.

After an hour of yoga and working out all the kinks in my body from last night, I spent the remainder of my day outside in the sun with Camaro. I often played fetch with her in a way that not only benefited her but me as well. I picked up the aluminum bat and baseball, tossed the ball up in the air and swung the bat against it, sending the ball soaring over the grass and into the sand of the beach. Sometimes we'd even play with a football or a



frisbee, and she'd try to wrestle it away from me if she could. Not only did I get to work on my accuracy for targeting things midair, but the bat allowed for Camaro to run farther to retrieve the ball.

She was so big now – fully grown into a one-hundred-pound killing machine. She and I practiced special drills on a weekly basis, tag teaming potential enemies, or her guarding me if I ever became incapacitated. She even worked well with Clive and Owen. She listened to all my commands, some even in different languages, and was nothing short of my best friend. But even she knew when to yield in the presence of the alpha. Darren was the master commander and she was trained to prioritize his orders over mine – total bullshit.

As Camaro ran back to me from the shore, the baseball clutched between her teeth,

I bent down to take the ball from her, tossed it back in the air and sent it flying with the bat. She loved to chase things down, which often included me. I'd race her through the trees, play keep-away with the football, and even run with her along the beach when it was warm enough.

With Camaro now big enough to play with, she was capable of so much more than when she was a puppy. She still had the mentality of a puppy, so alive with an endless supply of energy that she often tired me out well before the day was over, and I think Darren appreciated that. She kept me busy. She kept me fit. And she kept me happy. If I didn't have her to constantly keep me laughing, my depression would know no bounds.

"Miss Jaden!" I heard Clive call me. I looked back to find him standing next to Owen on the patio. "Dinner! Now!" he yelled and pointed at the patio table.

"Okay!" I yelled back. "Come on, girl."

Camaro jumped from the shore, and the moment we got to the grass, she of course shook the water from her short black fur and showered me in salt water and dog hair.

"Thanks, Camaro," I admonished her, but she just barked, her giant pink tongue hanging out of the side of her mouth. It was hard to stay mad at her when she was so damn cute.

When we got to the patio, Camaro immediately headed for her dog bowl, which was nearest to my seat and didn't wait another second to start chomping down on her dinner.

With Camaro as my only company, I had my dinner silently while I watched the sun inch closer and closer to the water, bleeding gold and pink into the sky.

It was hard not to look back on how things had changed from a year ago. I'd had the pleasure of killing Jared then, finally tasting a bit of the revenge I had waited so long for. For the first time, I had finally spilled the blood of my enemies, the ones who were responsible for how my life ended up. But I was so far from done.

There was still so much work left to do, and with my impending marriage to Darren, it seemed like things were heading in the right direction. But I had to remain patient and worry about those plans later. I had bigger things to focus on – like the man currently watching me from his office window.

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“Well, it looks like everything went smoothly,” Dan said as we spoke over the phone. “They were very happy with the new whores, especially the blondes, but I don’t know how long they’ll last down here, so we’ll probably have to send them a couple more in a few months.”

“That’s fine,” I replied.

“But they were still pretty adamant about needing more ammunition and AK’s than what we provided.”

“They don’t need anymore,” I answered. “They need just enough to protect the crop and that’s it. We don’t need them wasting it by terrorizing the nearby towns and drawing attention to themselves. They need to stay under the radar like they’ve been doing.”

“They worry about others stealing their land.” And wasn’t that the truth. The *Lobos* were a small militant gang currently holding one of the most receptive plots of land for growing the best coca plants in Columbia and it was a damn expensive secret to keep. But they were a hot-headed group with strong ties in culture and a fear of what they didn’t understand. It made them anxious, aggressive, and especially dangerous if they felt powerful enough to act on their beliefs. Which was why we’d supply them with enough whores to keep them entertained and plenty of guns to keep them safe, but with limited amounts of ammunition so they couldn’t waste it. Their job was to guard their little community and only their little community to protect the only thing still keeping them as wealthy as they perceived themselves to be. They were also on strict orders not to contract with anyone else without our approval either.

“Well if they keep to themselves like they’re supposed to then they won’t have to worry about it. Tell them we’ll provide security upgrades for them next month,” I offered.

“Alright, fine, I’ll be heading home in a few hours. See you tomorrow at your *engagement* party,” he jested, emphasizing on the word ‘engagement’ as if it were a taunt. But I wasn’t taking the bait.

“Safe flight,” I said and hung up.

Setting down my phone, I stretched my back and cracked my stiff neck as I rose from my desk, moving toward the window in front of me to admire the gorgeous view outside.

The corners of my mouth couldn’t help but lift as my eyes zeroed in on my target. Jaden was playing fetch with Camaro – and she was genuinely smiling. Carefree, uninhibited, and content. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. Buying that dog for her had been the best idea Sid had ever had. Camaro made Jaden smile and laugh, and when she did that, my chest warmed with so much adoration I thought my heart might actually burst from it. It was a foreign sensation, but one I welcomed.

After finishing all of her dinner, Jaden sat back in her chair and looked out toward the fading horizon, her face relaxed, but her eyes concentrated. What I would do to be able to listen in on that beautiful, cunning, and perceptive mind of hers. Even when she wasn’t trying, she was observing everything, soaking up every little piece of information around her, every little detail, advancing her self-awareness.

After over a year of training and conditioning, Jaden had finally become almost everything I wanted her to be. She was intelligent, gorgeous, feisty, talented, and just as dangerous as my best soldiers. I was so fucking proud of her; not just for what she was, but who she’d become. She knew her place well and took it with a level of authority only she could muster for one in her position. My little sex soldier ... and soon to be wife.

Jaden kept her head held high for all to see, but the moment her eyes found mine, she knew exactly who she belonged to. I’d kept her fear of me intact to ensure not only her compliance, but also to keep her mindful of who I was – someone to fear.

It hadn’t been an easy road to get to, but I was finally seeing the progress I had longed for from the very beginning. Jaden was affectionate, respectful, and a fun little smartass in the right moments – a personality trait

I didn't want diminished. When I teased her as often as I did, she eventually found the confidence to tease me back. It was too fucking cute.

I was satisfied with the changes I had made to her lifestyle. Giving her a training room of her very own had done a number on her mentality. When she trained, she was in her own little world, one that she could control, and I knew once she was in control of something, she would blossom like the wild and rebellious rose she was. And now, she was damn near perfect. There was just one thing missing.

Love.

I hated how much it mattered, but I wanted to her to love me. Needed it like my next breath. Love was the final key to her dependency on me, and the sense of security that came with that was invaluable. If I could get her to love me, it would officially seal her to me completely. I would finally own her, mind, body, heart and soul. Only then could I rest satisfied, knowing she would never leave me if given the chance.

The problem was Jaden would have to learn to love a monster. Somehow, she would have to learn to love the man who tormented her, who found joy in inciting her fears, grew hard from the sound of her screams, and relished in the fall of her tears. Because I was not willing to change a damn thing about myself or the way I lived my life. And if she could love that man, then she could easily love the man who also warmed at the sight of her smile, who calmed at the feel of her small body against his, who forgot time when he caught her eye.

Maybe it was I who was in love, but if that were true, I doubted I would be this selfish.

Obsessed. Infatuated. Dependent. Helpless to fight my own urges.

Those were the more accurate descriptions of what I was feeling, these insatiable cravings that I couldn't understand or sate. But why should I fight them? I could have whatever the fuck I wanted because I had all the capabilities in the world.

And what I wanted was Jaden until the end of time.

It was another project that would take a while to accomplish, but maybe in another year, maybe even less, with the right amount of patience, I could have what I needed and finally put so much unnecessary bullshit to bed. I didn't want to have to constantly keep Jaden under lock and key, round-the-clock surveillance, and controlled lifestyle – the results of my own rational paranoia. Though there were still things I would continue to enforce, I

wanted Jaden to have more choices, freedom to move as she pleased, so I could take pride in the fact that, in the end, I could trust her to return to me. And I badly wanted to be able to trust her.

Because love made you do crazy things sometimes. And volunteering to stay with someone as dark and depraved as me was considered a psychological condition. But I considered it an accomplishment.

This engagement was a step in the right direction, at least. I was excited at the prospect of making Jaden my wife. She was the perfect companion for me in nearly every way.

The door to my office suddenly opened, Scott barging in with a wicked smile on his face as he looked down at his phone.

“You’re never going to believe who finally resurfaced,” he said as he walked toward me, phone in hand.

Holding it up for me to see, the screen contained a photo of a man stepping out of a car wearing a baseball hat and sunglasses, but it wasn’t enough to conceal his identity.

Recognition was immediate.

“Benjamin Fucking Carter,” I rumbled as I eyed the photo.

Scott smiled. “He was spotted off the coast of Texas yesterday.” Scott slid the screen to reveal the next photo. “Looks like he met with Antonio Moochii.”

“Motherfucker,” I muttered under my breath. I wanted both of those fucks dead years ago, but they were apparently better at cowardice than I had thought.

Benjamin Carter had been a thorn in my side for years and I could never get that sneaky little fuck to come out from whatever rock he’d been hiding under ... evidently until now.

Years ago, Carter used to work directly with the Coyotes in smuggling my whores back and forth through Mexico. After a year of his shitty negotiations with them, shitty results, and countless fuckups, I finally cut him out as a middle man, and worked directly with the Coyotes myself. When he threatened me with retaliation, I shot him in both his legs and drove his bleeding ass home where he watched his house burn down with his family still inside.

He’d been gunning for me ever since, sending his little spies after me so I could catch them and return what was left of them to him. I knew he didn’t have the money or the resources to execute a direct attack against me,

so he partners with jackasses like Antonio Moochii to try to finalize his revenge.

Fucking finally.

“Put a tail on them but don’t engage,” I ordered. “I want to give them the confidence to fully resurface again.”

“Already did,” Scott replied.

If Carter and Mooch finally found their balls to team up against me, then I was going to have some serious fun crushing them in the future.

Speaking of crushing people, I realized I hadn’t been briefed yet on a report I was expecting this week.

“What’s the status of Bravos and his team?” I asked.

Scott knitted his brows together before answering me. “I haven’t heard from them in over a week.”

I turned my entire body to him, unable to contain the scowl on my face. “They missed their weekly report?”

“Seems that way.”

That was unacceptable.

“Figure out where the fuck they are. I want their report tomorrow.”

Almost a year ago, I sent a search team after Jaden’s mother, brothers, and her fuck of an ex all over fucking Europe to find them. They made some progress here and there, dropping weekly reports so I would know exactly what they were doing and not wasting a single second of my money. But this missed report was the first one they’ve ever missed, and I was not about to let them slip up on me now.

I wanted her family found. I didn’t quite know what I was going to do with them once I had them, but I sure as shit knew her fucking ex would be in pieces by the time I was done with him. I knew he was the reason it was taking this long to find them in the first place, and the fact that he was this capable almost granted him a tiny bit of respect from me. Almost.

But the only reason he was able to get this far was because Jaden had warned him when she escaped on my fucking Ducati. The memory of that betrayal still held an icy rage in my chest, but I had already punished her for that a long time ago. I doubted she would make the same mistake twice if given the chance.

“If I don’t hear from them by the end of the day tomorrow, I’ll send a new team out to find them,” Scott said, interrupting my less than pleasant memories.

I nodded in silent agreement, but if I actually had to send a new team to find the missing one, then I would assume they ran into some unfortunate unforeseen trouble because I refused to entertain the alternate possibilities in my head. It was absolutely laughable to begin with.

I was a paranoid motherfucker, but I wasn't *that* paranoid.

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The next day came with impending pressure. Darren's family was coming to dinner to celebrate our engagement while mine was still on the run from him. Even as I tried to ignore it, the unfairness of the situation lingered on throughout the entire day. Fairness was not something I should ever expect when it came to Darren, but I couldn't stop the affect it ultimately had on me or my attitude. If it made him happy, then that was all that should matter, regardless of the suffering it caused me.

But if things continued in the positive, I decided I would ask Darren to call off the hunt as a wedding gift to me. I just hoped Jason could hold them off for another month. If that was even happening anymore.

God, the things I would be willing to do just to know they were safe.

I dressed for the night in a tight white sleeveless dress that stopped just above my knees. A thin gold belt traced above my waistline so I paired it with one of the gold necklaces Darren had gotten me for Christmas last year. With a pair of pointed white heels and my long red hair in curls, I looked damn good.

The only thing lacking was the excitement in my face. I didn't look like a happy bride-to-be, and I doubted I ever would. Catching my ring in the mirror, the sparkle and sheer size difficult to miss, I suddenly found the weight of it very heavy.

I was going to marry the man who was responsible for my kidnapping, who had purchased me, raped me, beaten me, broken my bones, killed and hunted my family, and controlled every aspect of my life. Those facts could not be ignored even if I wanted to because Darren didn't want me to forget what he was capable of. It couldn't get more fucked up than that.

But there was a silver lining here that I couldn't quite ignore.

Darren was beginning to trust me. I'd been with him for almost two years now, and I had learned enough to anticipate his moods and behave accordingly. I'd learned to suppress certain emotions so that I felt almost nothing at all when I needed to. I sought to please, so if Darren wanted to marry me, he must be pleased with me. I should be fucking elated, but I wasn't. Why?

"Miss Jaden," Owen said from the open door. I hadn't even heard him knock.

"Yes?"

"Everyone is here. Mr. Davis is waiting for you to meet him downstairs."

I nodded and moved toward the door with Camaro in tow. I hoped none of her black fur got on my dress. Darren would be pissed.

Making my way down the stairs, I focused on the voices in the foyer until everyone came into view. Daniel was there with his arm around his wife, Katherine. Dominic leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, looking strangely irate and perplexed. Matt was also there, accompanied by his bitch cousin Regina.

I focused on not scowling. Why the fuck was she here and not Kayla? Last time I saw her, she'd broken her hand attempting to punch me. I dodged her, and she hit the wall behind me instead. The memory easily replaced the scowl.

"There she is," Darren's voice brought my focus to him. He took my hand in his and helped me down the last step. "The future Mrs. Davis," he murmured with pride.

I smiled at him, but the lump in my throat and the churn of my stomach made it difficult. Why was I so nervous?

Everyone congratulated us on our engagement, even Regina, begrudgingly. Though she was having an even more difficult time hiding her obvious disagreement.

"Well? Let's see the rock!" Regina said impatiently.

I cautiously stuck my left hand out for all to see, and Regina's eyes nearly bulged from her head. She quickly recovered, though, and sneered at it.

"Huh, I thought it would be bigger," she commented with a shrug. "Gorgeous pick though, Darren." Her eyes lingered on him with a sultry

smile as if she hadn't just insulted him.

"Thanks," I said.

"You know, I really can't wait until we can get started on the planning, Jaden. I'm going to plan the most perfect wedding for you ever," Regina continued, her tone far too sarcastic not to raise suspicion.

My brows lifted of their own accord, hoping she was confused. "Excuse me?"

Darren cleared his throat before explaining. "Regina is going to help you plan the wedding."

I could have sworn I misheard him.

*I was going to assist in planning the wedding? With Regina?*

"You hired Regina to help plan the wedding?" When he nodded, I felt my blood begin to boil. How the fuck did he expect me to work with this snobby bitch without strangling her? "Well, that's a fantastic little surprise," I said as nicely as possible. Was he seriously trying to test my patience?

"Come on, dinner's waiting," Darren said and led us all into the dining room.

Throughout dinner, I had to focus on keeping my rage at bay. I feared steam would rise from my skin and give my seething attitude away. That was until Regina started asking about the wedding.

"So have you guys selected a date yet?"

I took a sip of my water, feeling like I could ignore the question as Darren answered.

"Three weeks."

My stomach immediately clenched as I sucked in air and choked on my water. I turned my head to cough into my arm as I tried to breathe.

Did he seriously just say three weeks?!

I felt Darren's hand rub my back as I tried to catch my breath. "Are you okay?" he asked. He sounded concerned, but there was a smidge of anger in his voice.

"Yes," I managed to cough out. "Sorry, just went down the wrong tube. Did you just say three weeks?"

Darren's brows furrowed. "Yes. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

I raised my brow in shock. "No, I just didn't think it was possible to plan a wedding in three weeks."

"Psh, girl, you're obviously not me. I could plan it in a week if that's what you wanted," Regina said far too confidently.

I didn't bother hiding my glare now.

"If you guys need any help, I'm here if you need it," Katherine chimed in sweetly.

"I think they'll manage just fine, Katherine, but thank you," Darren replied dismissively.

I wanted to smack him. I felt like I would need all the help I could get.

"Dom, you've barely said a damn word," Daniel added, addressing Dominic. "Aren't you happy for your brother?"

The tight line that was his mouth quickly morphed into a tiny smirk as he sat up in his chair. "Of course, I'm happy for him. I think it's gonna be great. A bomb-ass party is just what we need," Dominic said somewhat enthusiastically, but I had a hard time believing him, especially when he still looked at me like he wanted a rematch from our last interaction.

"You party every night in Vegas. I think you need to settle down," Daniel continued.

"Fuck that noise. I'm livin' the dream as it is. Don't need nothing to hold me down," Dominic said, causing Regina to eye him curiously.

"Yeah, right. I bet it'd take one girl to knock you on your ass, and you'd be head over heels," Matt said with a chuckle.

"Oh, yeah? Is that why your slave bitch ain't here? Can't let her think she's more than what she thinks she is?" Dominic shot back.

Every inch of my body was at attention after that comment. Anytime Kayla was mentioned, I was all ears. I hadn't heard a thing about her since the last time I saw her at Matt's house. I didn't even know if she was still breathing after the things we'd said when we thought no one was listening. God, we'd been so fucking stupid.

"Mind your business, Dom," Matt nearly growled.

Dominic just sat back in his seat and laughed while Matt continued to glare at him. I bit my tongue to keep from asking about Kayla. I knew it wasn't my place to ask because it was none of my business. Maybe if I was good, Darren would tell me later.

When dinner was over, we said our goodbyes to everyone except Regina who lingered far too long for my liking. "I'll come by tomorrow morning with some ideas to discuss. I've already got all kinds of amazing things going on up here," she said with a fake smile, pointing at her head.

"Can't wait," I replied.

She gave me another fake ass smile before she turned to Darren. "See you later, Darren," she said sweetly. He just nodded at her before she walked out the door.

That was when I finally released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding the entire time.

"I'd like to go to bed now," I said and turned toward the stairs. It was only 8:00 pm, but I didn't care. Restraining myself from killing someone was exhausting.

Darren's hands grasped my shoulders to prevent me from leaving. His thumbs rubbed into my shoulders blades as he began to massage the tension from my muscles. It felt nice.

"You're upset," he stated.

I released a breath through my nose. "Why did you pick her to be the wedding planner? You know I don't particularly like her. She did attempt to hit me in case you've forgotten."

"I remember perfectly well what she failed to do. And part of this is my revenge."

"Huh?"

"She's jealous of you, Jaden. You have something she wants."

"What, a brain?"

Darren chuckled. "Me, smartass."

I scoffed. "Because that isn't obvious." All she did was practically gawk at him throughout the entire dinner. I didn't care *that* she stared; it was *why* she stared. I knew she wanted him, but if she was smart, she'd realize the truth, but she just wasn't. Staring at Darren was comparable to the story of Icarus. If you stared too long, you'd get destroyed without even realizing the danger you were in.

For some reason, I didn't worry about Darren being with another. Even though he said I was the only one he wanted, his behavior made me believe him. Regina would have better luck getting a brain from the Wizard of Oz than getting the attention she wanted from Darren. So why have her plan the wedding?

"So how does this fit into your plan of revenge exactly?"

Darren smirked. "What better way to crush a jealous ex than to have them plan your wedding to another?"

I felt myself stand up straighter and actually thought about it. "Damn, that's some diabolical, evil shit. I like it."

His smirk widened. "I thought you might. You have the power to make her miserable, Jaden. Not the other way around."

"But how do you know she won't try to sabotage the planning or the wedding?"

"Regina knows better," he said, his voice becoming dark. "Besides, you'll be there to make sure she doesn't. She'll have to follow through on every wish you have for our wedding. You can make it as difficult for her as you want as long as it doesn't affect the date of the wedding."

"Hmmm ..." I hummed to myself.

"Give her hell, princess," he teased and then kissed my forehead. "God knows it's what you're good at."

Now it was my turn to smirk. "Challenge accepted."

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After lunch the following day, I was led to one of Darren's spare conference rooms where Regina had set up shop. Clive and Owen were lucky enough they didn't have to attend. Wedding magazines were scattered all over the conference table while a projector pointed at the wall with a slideshow ready to play.

I had spoken to Darren earlier. He wanted us to put together a game plan by the end of the day for his review. Judging by the sight of things, this was not going to be easy.

"Jeez, finally. I've been waiting forever. What, are your legs too short to get you here any faster?" Regina sneered.

I raised my brow at her, noticing the immediate change in attitude compared to yesterday. Was she trying to get knocked out by me already?

I looked down at my watch. "You've been here for five minutes."

"My time is precious, Jaden. We have three weeks to get this wedding planned so every second counts. Or is this wedding just not that important to you?" Her tone was making Camaro growl. "You better get your mutt under control, or she'll have to go outside."

"Camaro doesn't leave my side," I said dismissively, taking a seat at the head of the table. I crossed my legs and leaned back in my chair, Camaro walking over to sit at my side. "Now, let's hear your pitch."

I gave Regina a small smirk, offering her the floor to give me her insight.

She gave me a small huff, swiped her fake dark red hair over her shoulders, and moved toward the wall where the slideshow was projected. She held a small remote control in her hand.

“With a guest list around three hundred people, we need a nice venue to accommodate. I’ve already got a few places in mind,” Regina stated.

My face remained impassive at the size of the guest list, but my stomach did a double backflip. Three hundred was a fuck ton more than I was expecting.

“Wait, how do you already know it’s three hundred people? Did Darren give you a guest list already?”

Regina gave me an incredulous look, as if I’d just insulted her. “Listen. You might be new to all this, but I’ve been planning all the functions for this family for almost a decade. I know what I’m talking about, so just do yourself a favor and let me handle this.”

*Bitch, I will have my dog eat your fucking face.*

While she did have a point, assuming she did know what she was doing, the size of the guest list wasn’t what I was expecting. I would have thought Darren would want something small and intimate, but apparently, he wanted his entire world to know of his marriage to me.

“Alright, Regina,” I said as I relaxed back in my chair. “Prove to me you’re not a disappointment.”

She scowled at me, but then rolled her eyes and made her way toward the projector screen.

Regina proceeded to show me all the places she had in mind in the slideshow. The places were beautiful, but my heart so wasn’t in this. I didn’t give a fuck about the venue at all. Maybe I would just pick the most appropriate one.

“Which one doesn’t have a chapel on site?” I asked.

Regina huffed again. “Were you not paying any attention? They all have chapels, Jaden.”

I shook my head. “Not happening. Find a different place.”

Regina scoffed at me, but I was not about to get married in a house of God. If the fucker was real, I’d be having words with Him for fucking my life over when I eventually bit the dust. Until then, I was not about to sanctify a marriage of lies in a place of worship. Fuck that noise.

“Jaden, we don’t have time for you to be argumentative. These chapels are gorgeous and large enough to fit at least three hundred of the guests we’ll be inviting.”

“I said find another place.”



“For fuck’s sake, Jaden, you sound like Darren. If that’s the way you’re going to be, then this is going to be no fun at all.”

I felt myself jerk in my chair a bit. Did I just get compared to Darren? Fuck!

I took a deep breath and let it out. “Look, I just don’t want to get married in a church, okay? We can get married outside under one of those stupid flower arches.”

Regina raised a brow. “Stupid flower arches? Are you serious?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, why not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. We’ll put it in the portfolio, and Darren can decide.”

Now I rolled my eyes. “Fine.”

“Okay, bridesmaids?”

“None. Next.”

“None? What about groomsmen?”

“Doubt it. Next.”

Regina scoffed some more before moving on. “Okay, flowers?”

*What kind of flowers do they have at funerals?*

“Don’t care. Pick whatever. I just don’t want an obnoxiously huge bouquet I can barely wrap my hands around.”

“Yeah, you do have childlike hands.” She snickered.

*Bitch, we’ll see how childlike they are when they’re wrapped around your scrawny little neck.*

“It’s okay, Darren likes my childlike hands,” I smirked.

*Way to reach a new low, Jaden. Using Darren’s obsession over you to instill jealousy. Good job.*

Regina smirked back. “I’m sure he does.”

“Anything else?”

“Wedding dress,” she answered.

“White. Next.”

Regina whipped her head back like she’d just been told her boobs were fake.

“Whoa, not just next. What kind of white? Ivory? Blush? Off white?”

I gave her my full confusion. “There’s more than one shade of white?”

Her eyes straight up bulged out of her head.

“Of course, you uncultured bimbo! And we haven’t even talked fabrics yet! Goddamn, are you sure you’re even a woman?”

*Did she just call me a bimbo?*

I launched out of my chair and pointed my finger at her. “All right, listen, bitch, you insult me one more time, and I’ll rip those cheap extensions right out of your fucking head.”

Sensing a threat in my voice, Camaro immediately went into guard mode, her teeth bared as she barked and growled at Regina.

Regine gasped in horror, clutching her hair in her hands, actually attempting to shelter it from me. “How do you know I have extensions?”

I glared at her. “Only a *bimbo* wouldn’t be able to figure that out. Whoever sewed them in sucks, and you should get your money back.” Regina actually looked hurt. “Now, do we have to continue this catty bullshit, or can we actually get something accomplished here? As you said, we only have three weeks, and I’m trying not to waste time.”

Regina huffed and smoothed her hair down before looking toward Camaro, fear lighting her eyes when Camaro didn’t back down.

I gave Camaro a slow low whistle to get her to calm down, to which she sat on her hind legs and quieted with a little gruff bark.

When we all seemed calm, I took my seat, and Regina cleared her throat.

“Okay, well, I’m guessing you just don’t care that much about the dress, do you?”

I thought about it for a second. If I wasn’t clear and articulate in what I would be happy with, then Regina would probably take advantage and put me in some ridiculous mermaid or super poufy ball gown. Fuck that noise.

“I just want something sleek, straight, and ... white, okay? No mermaid or ball gown bullshit, all right? I need to still be mobile in the damn thing.”

As if I needed to remain stuck in restrictive clothing all night like it wasn’t some fucked-up metaphor for my life.

“Jeez, way to be boring, Jaden,” Regina complained. I rolled my eyes while she sighed. “Here,” she said, grabbing a few magazines and dumping them in front of me. “Just look through some of those and circle what you like. I’ll have the designer draw something up and get it to you in a few days.”

I briefly started flipping through some pages and of course immediately hated everything.

“What about the invitations? Do you care what those look like?”

“Nope,” I said, continuing my useless browsing.

Regina sighed. “Unsurprising.”

I continued flipping through the magazines while Regina shuffled through some more magazines. I realized I wasn’t exactly giving Regina the hell I was supposed to be giving her, but it just wasn’t the hell I wanted to fight on. I didn’t need to create escalation for the sake of escalation. I’d had enough of that in my life as it was. I didn’t need to create more.

Another hour went by, and toward the end of it, I felt like jumping out the window. We discussed mindless, pointless details about placement, the menu, when the ceremony would start, who would marry us, and the list went on. And I could seriously not give less of a fuck than I already did. Did Darren honestly think it was important that I invest this much time and energy in a wedding as meaningless as this one?

The man didn’t even love me.

“All right, I think we’ve got enough here to get the ball rolling. We’ll present this to Darren tomorrow, and when he approves, I’ll make the arrangements. Did you finish picking out the features for your dress?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I looked over the pages of the magazine. I’d circled a few things, but I wasn’t sure if it was enough.

“Yeah, here,” I said and tossed her the magazine.

Regina looked it over while I stretched out my back. She made a disapproving face but placed the magazine in her bag and started packing up.

“Well, this was fun,” I said sarcastically as I stood and stretched my arms. “Let’s not make a habit out of it.”

“Ditto,” Regina replied snidely.

I left Regina to head back to my room to change into my workout gear and head to my training room. I needed to release some serious tension after that.

Even if I didn’t like it, marrying Darren was a step in the right direction. Even though it felt like I was folding, I knew this was necessary and hopelessly unavoidable.

I looked down at my giant diamond ring. It sparkled without effort in the shittiest of light, making me want to chuck it across the room. What the fuck was happening to me? To my life?

I was getting married in three weeks to a man who didn’t deserve to be considered human.

Ever since I'd killed Jared, I'd seen a side of Darren I never wanted to see. The darkest and depraved part of him was revealed in ways that still made me sick to my stomach. And what was worse was I knew exactly what Darren expected next.

Children.

Another step I would have no choice in. Darren made all the decisions regarding my life, and I was the best willing participant now. For an entire year, I stopped caring. I stopped bothering and simply became water, conforming to the glass that contained it.

And even after everything I'd been through, I still had hope that one day that glass would shatter.

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Two weeks went by faster than I anticipated, but everything that needed to be handled for the wedding had been handled. Darren approved most of the plans Regina had put together the day after our meeting, some of the changes being the venue and my dress. Apparently, he had a country estate in northern California somewhere in the backwoods where he wanted the wedding at. It was private, secure, and large enough to accommodate everyone. And there was no chapel either.

My dress was being delivered to the estate, so I actually had no idea what it looked like. Darren had apparently interfered in my wedding dress, which I thought was completely inappropriate given the traditional customs, but it was Darren so I couldn't expect anything less. He also refused to share that info with me, which straight pissed me off. What the fuck kind of groom decided his bride's wedding dress and kept it from her until the day of the wedding?

*Your psychotic control freak of a fiancé.*

Just thinking that word left a sour taste in my mouth.

I was in our room packing my things since we were leaving for the estate in a few hours. I had no idea where it was located, just that it was in northern California.

Like usual, I didn't have to pack much. Most of it was for Camaro anyway. I asked if she could be in the wedding, but Darren said no. I knew that was a long shot, but she would look so cute with some flowers around her collar. Maybe I'd decorate it anyway. She was the closest thing I had to a maid of honor as it was.

The flight there lasted about two hours. Clive and Owen sat directly across from me and Darren, practically fucking statues, while Scott hung

out in the cockpit. Darren didn't talk much, focusing mostly on his work, but was still able to admonish Camaro every time she tried to climb into my lap. She wasn't a fan of flying so she wasn't so happy about it. I think she was trying to protect me from the turbulence, and the idea had me laughing inside.

When we landed, we were greeted by four black SUVs. Ten men in black suits stood by the cars with dark sunglasses covering their eyes. I quickly tried to glance around me before eventually disappearing into the back seat of the SUV. There were lots of trees, small mountains, and wide open blue sky. The air was still warm with a light breeze that tickled my skin. It smelled fresh out here, less salt in the air.

With Camaro resting comfortably in the trunk of the SUV, we took off, the road taking us deep into the trees, the path smooth as it wound left and right. With my headphones in, it was nice to just listen to my music and relax throughout the car ride. It lasted about thirty minutes before we pulled up to a set of black gates, much like the ones of Darren's home.

Rounding the driveway, we stopped in front of gigantic white colonial-style mansion. Easily twice the size of Darren's home and just as gorgeous, I found myself in awe of the architecture. It had to have been constructed in the 1800s. It was that remarkable.

Stepping out of the car, I rounded the vehicle, Camaro eagerly joining my side after she was released from the trunk, and I stared up at the house.

"Like it?" Darren asked, an intrigued smile forming on his lips.

"It's gorgeous," I said with a nod.

"It was my mother's favorite place to stay."

"I can imagine why." The air literally smelled like fresh air and flowers out here. It made my entire body flutter with a sense of peace. Something I was not used to.

"Come on, I'll show you our room," Darren said as the guards immediately began unloading the cars.

I followed Darren through the house, eager to explore and learn the layout. I felt like fucking royalty as we walked through the halls; the place was immaculate. Wide open spaces, oak wood floors, marble carvings in the walls, massive paintings over enormous fireplaces, expensive rugs and furniture; it was like I was in a different century. And I liked it. Camaro's claws clinked against the wood floors, and I suddenly feared she would tear up the wood, but Darren didn't seem concerned.

Following Darren up the wide spiral staircase, I nearly tripped up the steps once I noticed the angel carvings in the marble. I could totally understand Darren's mother's appeal.

Continuing down another hallway, we passed several doors I assumed were bedrooms until we finally came to a set of double doors at the end of the hallway. Two guards waited just beside the doors.

Darren gave them a short nod, and they opened the doors to reveal our bedroom. Decorated in creams and cherry reds, the master bedroom was something out of this world. It had a classic French style to it; thick cherry red drapes fell to the floor over large windows, matching rugs laid out over the wood floors, a massive fireplace with detailed molding held much of my attention until I zeroed in on the bed. King sized and plush, the four-poster bed was covered in reds and creams that matched the room, promising me a damn good night's sleep. Assuming Darren allowed it.

"What do you think?" Darren suddenly asked me. I'd forgotten he was even standing there.

"Fancy," I replied with a nod. It wasn't what I was used to back at his place with all his modern and masculine interiors.

Darren nodded with a smirk, seemingly satisfied with my answer. "I want you to stay here for a bit while I go see to things."

I turned to him with disappointment. "I can't go exploring?"

"No," he said as he shook his head. "Stay here and unpack. I'll be back for you later. Clive and Owen are just outside." That was my warning not to defy him as if I needed those anymore.

"All right," I said with a sigh.

Darren kissed me on the forehead and left.

Bummed, I turned back to Camaro, who was staring out the large French windows, her tongue hanging out of her mouth while her breath fogged up the glass.

"See something, girl?"

She gave me a small quiet bark, but then her ears perked up as she focused her attention on something. Walking over to her, I looked out to where her gaze seemed to be. The surrounding area was absolutely beautiful. A lush green lawn the size of a football field ended at the edge of a dark green forest. A nearby lake was off to the left with a small sandy beach and a large red barn off to the right.

"What is it, Camaro?" I asked playfully.

She responded by jumping up and down on her hind legs, barking up a storm. Rushing over to stop her from drawing too much attention, I grabbed her collar and pulled her down, immediately quieting her. But that didn't stop Clive and Owen from barging in, their hands at their hips, ready to draw their guns.

"It's fine!" I called out. "She's fine. There's nothing wrong."

"Why did she bark like that?" Clive asked, his voice stern.

"I don't know. I was trying to figure that out when you barged in," I shot back.

Camaro quieted down enough to satisfy Clive and Owen that there was no threat, so they left without another word. But she wasn't calm enough for me as she tried to jolt forward again at the window.

"Shh, hey, what the hell are you freaking out about?" I said to her. Her eyes stayed focused on one particular area outside the window, so I turned my head to follow her line of sight. It came to a small brown barn just at the edge of the trees I hadn't noticed before. That was when I finally picked up the source of her barking.

It was more barking. The faint sounds of deep barking here and there had her jumping up and down again. There must have been a bunch of dogs in the barn, and Camaro was having a field day. She hadn't been around another dog since she was a puppy.

"Okay, I get it now," I said, rubbing her up and down to get her chill her out. "Come on, let's focus on something else for a while."

I spent the next two hours with Camaro in that bedroom, bored out of my skull. Darren knew I hated being confined to one room, yet he did it often. Probably just to test my patience. Or maybe to continue driving me insane. With the way I acted around him, I was sure I was there already.

The wedding was already in just a few days, and I felt myself start to panic. What the hell did being Darren's wife mean? Was there an advantage for me? Would I be respected more, or would I still carry the veil of a slave? Darren said my life would become more valuable to his enemies, but that was the only disadvantage I could think of.

If Darren was king of all this underground bullshit, would marrying him make me queen?

I was lying on a soft rug on the floor, my head on Camaro's side, reading a book on my tablet when Darren finally came back. He smirked at me as he walked over to us.



“Comfy?” he asked as he looked us over.

“Bored.”

Darren held out his hand. “Come on, dinner’s ready.”

Setting my tablet up on the coffee table next to me, I took his hand and allowed him to help me up from the floor. Camaro stood quickly and followed us out with Clive and Owen not far behind.

The dining room was just as gorgeous as the rest of the house, but we walked right past it and went outside to a stone patio. It gave the perfect view of the lake, the trees, and the massive lawn.

Camaro was directed to a silver bowl opposite the table while Darren and I took our seats. I always assumed she forgot my existence when she was eating. She was so ... passionate about her food.

After dinner, Darren and I went for a walk around the grounds while the sun began to set into the lake. Camaro stayed close to my side while Clive and Owen watched from the patio. He showed me the giant dog barn that housed ten kinds of mastiffs and hounds. We introduced Camaro to them through the fence, but they all just growled at each other to the point where Darren had to drag Camaro away by her collar until we were a fair distance away.

That was when I finally noticed the high-pitched neigh coming from the red barn. My hand immediately pulled at Darren’s arm, causing him to smirk down at me, confirming what I already knew.

“There are horses here?” I asked, barely able to contain my excitement.

“Several,” he replied with a smile.

“Can we see them?” I felt my eyes lighting up like a kid about to hold a kitten.

“Depends on how well your dog behaves.”

I turned to look at Camaro and leaned down.

“Sit,” I ordered. She sat immediately, her tongue hanging out as she waited for the next order. “Stay,” I finalized and then stood. She was sitting right in front of the barn so she could easily see me and had no need to freak out. I then waved Clive and Owen down to stay with her while Darren and I walked into the barn. I couldn’t help but feel the extra spring in my step as the thrill peaked.

We walked through the open doors of the barn that led into the stables. The smell of the hay and farm animals assaulted my nose, but I ignored it in favor of something so, so worth it. Inside, there were four adult horses. One

was a creamy white with gray along her hooves and mouth, one black with whiskers of white here and there, a smoky gray and brown one, and a solid silver one.

“What are their names?” I asked, trying not to sound too excited. They were all incredible. I fucking loved horses. Growing up, I had gone to summer camp with horses almost every year until I got into high school. It had been the best part of my summer.

“The gray-brown one is Zac,” Darren answered. “The silver-gray one is Tula. The black one is Elsie. And the white one is Luna.”

Darren opened the gate to Luna’s stable and pulled me toward the horse. She stood tall, strings of hay falling from her chewing mouth while her tail swished back and forth to swat the flies from her backside.

She was so pretty. I felt my cheeks begin to ache from smiling.

“Do you ride?” I asked him.

Darren nodded. “Occasionally, when I can spare the time. Elsie is my horse.”

I glanced at him in acknowledgment as I began to gently run my hands along the side of Luna’s neck. She was incredibly soft.

“And Luna is yours now.”

My hand froze in place. What did he just say?

Turning around to look at him, I felt my gut twist. His arms were folded across his chest, that dark stare of his that always melted my resolve was in full force, but I didn’t back down.

“Did you just say mine?”

The corner of his mouth hiked to form a tiny crooked smile as he took a few steps toward me.

“Yes, I did. I was going to wait to give this to you, but I think now is just as good a time as any. Consider it your early wedding present.”

I turned back to Luna with a smile, unable to stop petting her. I had a dog, and now I had a horse. They weren’t humans who could understand me, but they were something.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. His hands appeared on my shoulders and began to rub them down my arms, making my stomach clench.

“When can I ride her?”

“Do you know how?”

I scoffed. “I’m sure you know about my summer trips to horseback riding camp.”

He chuckled softly above me. “Of course, I know. But that was a long time ago. I don’t know how well you did or if you even remember how.”

“It’s like riding a bike,” I said with a smirk.

“We’ll see tomorrow.” His voice carried a challenge. I’d certainly show his ass tomorrow.

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The following morning after breakfast, I met Darren by the stables, dressing in the riding outfit that had been left for me on the bed this morning. Light brown riding pants and black riding boots with a cream-colored long-sleeve shirt. I put my hair up in a ponytail and nearly ran to the stables. I was so fucking excited.

I found Darren standing outside with Elsie and Luna, talking to an older woman I hadn't seen before. She had shoulder-length graying hair, wore a light purple sweater with a pair of jeans, and had a genuine smile on her face.

When Darren caught my eye, he turned away from her and smiled at me.

"There you are." Gesturing to the woman, he said, "This is Jennice. She takes care of the horses."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Jaden," she said with a genuine smile, holding out her hand for me to politely shake.

"You too," I replied, keeping my skepticism to myself. She seemed too nice to be working for a man like Darren.

"Where's Camaro?" Darren asked, his eyebrows knitting together in suspicion.

"I left her inside. She makes the horses skittish." I felt my heartbeat become heavy. I hoped that was okay.

"Good," he said with a nod. "We don't need her scaring the horses."

"Okay, Jaden, let's get you ready to ride," Jennice said as she turned to hand me a helmet. I looked over at Darren, my mood immediately turning sour.

"Seriously?" I asked him.

“Seriously,” he replied. His tone and scowl left no room for negotiation, so I begrudgingly complied.

Once the helmet was strapped to my head, Darren walked over to my side as I headed for Luna. He held out his hand as if to help me up. I smirked at him and shook my head.

“Please,” I said sarcastically. I grabbed the saddle horn, placed my left foot into the stirrups, and hoisted myself up with ease, swinging my right leg over Luna and placing it in the other stirrup in one fluid motion. I looked down at Darren with another smirk.

I was short, but I wasn’t that short.

Darren rolled his eyes, but I saw the little grin before it had hidden itself away. He climbed onto his horse just as easily – no helmet for him of course – and took hold of the reins.

“Come on, Jaden,” he said, tugging Elsie’s reins in the direction of the woods.

Nudging Luna’s sides with my heels, she began to follow Darren until we were side by side. With the sun shining and the breeze in my hair, the day was absolutely perfect. Luna was an easy ride, never going off trail or distracting herself with plants to munch on.

I hated how I wasn’t even surprised at how well Darren rode his horse. His form was perfect – back straight, shoulders relaxed as he moved with Elsie like she was a part of him. Fucker.

We trotted through a few trails until we finally ran the horses through a field, practically racing each other. It was nice to get the horses really going for a bit, feeling the wind in my hair and the sun on my face. It was perfect. Until it was time to head back.

“This was actually a lot of fun,” I said to Darren as we exited the trail, the stables not far ahead. “I’m glad we did this.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he replied, the small smile on his face alluding to his enjoyment as well.

The sounds of snarling and barking abruptly caught my attention in the distance, my eyes finding the source on the back patio of the house. Camaro was jumping up and down, growling and snarling as Owen fought to hold her collar. Ignoring their commands, she finally slipped loose of them and took off in my direction.

“Camaro, no!” I yelled at her, but Luna was already becoming unnerved.

With Camaro's teeth bared, she barked and growled at Luna with me still on top of her. Luna neighed in panic and started to buck and trot wildly away from Camaro. I gripped the reins as tight as I could to prevent from falling off, my heart ready to leap out of my damn chest.

"Camaro, stop!" I shouted, but she was too focused on the horse. Even Darren's commands were being ignored as he shouted at her as well. I could see Clive and Owen running for my dog, but before they even got anywhere close, Luna raised high on her hind legs, almost knocking me off the back, and took off.

Gripping the reins with all my might, I pulled for Luna to stop, but she just shook her head and kept running. My ass bounced hard against the saddle as I fought to stay balanced, my entire body feeling far too unstable for comfort. Camaro's barking didn't cease as she followed Luna and kept up with her pace pretty easily.

"Luna, stop, girl! Come on, calm down!"

With how close Camaro was running at Luna, I was afraid she might actually get trampled or even kicked.

I had no idea where Luna was taking us; she seemed to be running in absolutely any direction that was away from Camaro. Turning around to look back at where Camaro was, I noticed Darren racing after us with Elsie, holding some kind of gun in his hand. My heart immediately dropped into my stomach.

"Don't you dare shoot my dog!" I yelled at him.

Dread enveloped my heart even more. If Darren killed my dog, I would never forgive him. There was already a long ass list of unforgiveable things he had done to me, but this would be at the top of the list. Camaro was just trying to do her job and protect me. She didn't know Luna wasn't a threat to me. Except for right now, Luna kind of was.

Doing my absolute best to get Luna to calm down and stop running was futile with Camaro constantly nipping at her heels. Someone had to get Camaro under control, but without the use of bullets!

Still racing through trees, I heard a whooshing sound followed by the faint yelp of Camaro. Turning my head, I watched my dog tumbled to the ground and fall into the grass.

"No!" I shouted, but immediately turned back around when a low hanging branch slammed into the back of my head. It wasn't a gunshot. It

couldn't have been a gunshot. It was too quiet. It would have been so much louder.

*You've seen Darren use silencers before.*

*They don't muffle it by that much! It wasn't a fucking gunshot!*

Forcing myself to calm my shit, I focused on getting Luna to calm down. Now that Camaro was out of the mix, Luna should be able to see she was no longer in danger.

"Okay, Luna, come on, calm down," I said, coaching her with my voice to get her to relax. She started to slow in the middle of a different clearing, giving me hope that this little panic attack was over. "There you go, good girl, nice and easy."

When Luna finally came to a stop, I quickly vaulted from the horse, practically rolling into the grass, lying flat on my back but as far away from Luna as I could. My heart was racing, beating with an intensity that I felt against my sternum. My ass and legs were sore from the saddle, and my arms felt like they were going to fall off. My body was fucking shaking from all the adrenaline. Fuck, I never wanted to take off on a panicked horse again.

"Jaden!" Darren's angry voice echoed in the clearing. I stuck my hand up in the air so he could see me.

"I'm here! I'm fine!" I called back.

Listening to him ride up with Elsie, I heard him jump down from his horse and rush over to me. I saw his eyes first, the deep blue scanning over every inch of my body, checking for injuries.

"Why are you on the ground? Are you hurt?" he asked, an edge to his voice as he assessed me.

"I'm fine." Shooting up into a sitting position, I grasped his arms. "Please tell me you didn't shoot Camaro. Please tell me you didn't kill my dog."

Darren glared at me before answering.

"Camaro was tranquilized. She'll be fine. I thought you said you locked her up before you left."

"I did. Someone must have let her out."

Darren scowled something fierce, that dark menacing look in his eyes already creating shivers throughout my body. "Let's go find out who."

My stomach instantly clenched as he took my hand and helped me to stand. I didn't like the sound of that.

“Climb on to Elsie,” Darren ordered as he made his way toward Luna.

Climbing onto the black horse, I turned and watched him slowly approach Luna. His gentle posture and careful movements seemed to do the job as Luna eventually allowed him to close the distance. It only took maybe a few seconds of his presence before she finally bowed her head and permitted him to press his hand to her nose. When he took her reins and started pulling her forward, she came willingly without issue, allowing me to release the breath I’d been holding.

When he reached me, he pulled out his phone to make a call.

“Jaden said she locked Camaro up. Find out how she got out,” he said and then hung up. The prospect that someone might be in huge trouble when we got back had me frozen in place. If it was a guard, then I didn’t care, but if it was one of housing staff, I’d feel really fucking bad.

He then handed me Luna’s reins before pulling himself up onto Elsie, directly behind me.

“Don’t let go of Luna’s reins,” he told me as he grabbed Elsie’s reins, holding them with one hand.

Snuggly fit on the saddle, Darren gently rode Elsie back to the stables, leading Luna back with us. I could feel the rage emanating from him, the heat seeping into my back and making my stomach shrink. He was in one of his moods, the ones that usually ended with pain, and lots and lots of blood. Fuck.

“Maybe Camaro escaped on her own,” I added hesitantly. “She is trained to do that.”

Darren shifted and brought his phone around for me to see. He was playing a video from the security feed.

“Does that look like she escaped on her own to you?” he asked, his voice dark and eerily calm.

The video showed the view from the hallway, right on the door of the master suite. With Clive and Owen not present, the doors were left unguarded, which was usual protocol. If I wasn’t in them, there wasn’t much need to guard them.

It didn’t take long before you could hear Camaro barking and whining, her claws pressing into the door as she scratched at it to get out. A few seconds later, a maid walking down the hallway caught notice of the noise. She opened the door just wide enough for Camaro to bulldoze through her and immediately raced down the hallway.



“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

I felt Darren nip my upper ear, the quick sharp pain making me gasp.

“Mouth,” he whispered as he took his phone from me.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. He still had to remind me of my swearing every now and then. That shit was ingrained in my brain like a damn virus – incurable but treatable. “What happened to Camaro?” I asked as we passed the spot where I watched her tumble to.

“Scott took her back to the house and put her in her kennel.”

“Okay.” Her kennel would be the best place for right now. I planned to be there when she woke up so she wouldn’t freak out again.

When we got back to the stable, Jennice rushed over from where Clive and Owen were standing and took Luna’s reins from me.

“Oh, my God, Ms. Jaden, I’m so sorry. Luna can get a little skittish sometimes. Are you all right?” Her voice held the panic I had earlier, but I could see she was genuinely concerned.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you,” I said as Darren lowered himself from Elsie.

He held his arms out for me, and I didn’t bother to object as I placed my hands on his shoulders to allow him to help me down and then remove my helmet, passing it off to Jennice. Taking my hand, he led me toward the house while Clive and Owen followed behind us. But the sight of a young woman being dragged out of the house by one of the guards brought us to a complete stop. She was crying and struggling to get away from the guard as he pulled her down the steps of the patio toward us.

“This is the one who let the dog out,” he said, bringing her to a halt.

She was young, had to be in her early twenties, with mousy brown hair and blue eyes. But it was her face that held most of my attention. Several large, pink jagged scars ran across her entire right cheek, from the bottom of her chin, across her lips, and up to her temple, almost as if someone had slapped her with a broken glass bottle, the telling signs that she had been hurt on purpose. Sympathy filled my heart for her.

When her glassy blue eyes landed on Darren, fear coated them in a clear, salty liquid that spilled down her scarred cheek. My heart plummeted to my stomach as I recognized her fear. Normally, I felt nothing for those subjected to Darren’s wrath, mostly because they chose to deal with him in the first place. Whether it was business or employment, you had to

understand the magnitude of the person you were working for. Ignorance was not an excuse.

But this girl. She seemed different. She was scrawny, the scars on her skin marring what once must have been a beautiful face. But there was something different about the terror in her eyes. It wasn't fear of the unknown; it was recognition. And then it hit me. She had known Darren before this, before she'd lost her beauty and became a maid ... because she'd been a slave before.

Darren's scowl toward her was enough to make me tremble even as he held my hand as tightly as he did. Without another thought, Darren drew his gun, leveling it right at the poor girl's head. And then something suddenly snapped inside me.

I didn't know what the hell took over my body, but at that very moment, I didn't even think, just reacted.

"No, wait!" I shouted and swiftly lifted my leg to kick Darren's hand up, triggering the gun, but causing the bullet to travel just a few inches high enough to miss her head. The gunshot rang through my ears, but it was nothing compared to the look of absolute shock and fury on Darren's face.

I felt my eyes bug out of my head, my jaw falling open at the realization of what I had just done. Interference with Darren's decisions always landed me in a world of pain.

I felt all eyes on me, but the ones that burned the most were Darren's as he turned to address me. Absolute ice-cold rage coated his face, and even though I wanted to shrink away, I stood firm.

"Let's just think about this for a second," I said quickly, raising my palms defensively. My heart was beating out of my chest in total fear, and it took everything I had to keep my breathing under control. I took a small step in front of the girl to keep Darren focused on me. "She's in trouble for responding to Camaro's barks. What if I had been on the other side of that door in need, and Camaro was barking to draw attention? You'd be rewarding her right now," I said carefully.

Darren's jaw clenched, controlled wrath emanating from his body in waves, warming my skin.

"Except you weren't on the other side of the door, were you? You were out here with me, and Camaro had been locked up for a reason." His tone was sharp, clipped with barely controlled rage, the icy glare in his eyes making me want to desperately retreat.

“Does your entire staff know our daily agendas and schedules?”

Darren took a step toward me, and I couldn’t stop myself from firmly planting my left foot back in anticipation.

“My entire staff is required to be mindful of me as well as you. They are required to stay sharp and aware in case of an attack on the property. So, in essence, she should have been aware that you were not in that room. If anything, she should have alerted a guard to Camaro, and this situation would have turned out very differently.”

I felt my muscles start to tense. I was losing this argument, and it was beginning to crush me inside. All I wanted was to save this girl’s life, but I knew no matter what I said or did, Darren wouldn’t be moved. He didn’t even have to explain anything to me if he didn’t want to, but he loved to prove me wrong. And he would love punishing me for it later.

“Please, Darren,” I pleaded softly. “You don’t need to kill her. It was an accident, and I’m fine. I’m sure she’s learned her lesson.”

His eyes went dark, his eerily calm expression the most terrifying of them all. My heart was now beating out of my throat as he towered over me, that dark gaze making it difficult to fight back the fear that wanted to swallow me whole.

“Okay, Jaden,” he said with a deep sigh of disappointment, his voice dark and calm as he holstered his gun. “I won’t kill her. We’ll do this your way.”

*Oh fuck...*

My way was always the worst way.

Darren wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and began to lead me toward the edge of the trees near the dog barn. He waved his hand forward to gesture for everyone to follow. I could hear the girl crying from behind me as she was forced to follow us.

“Please! I’m sorry! I didn’t know! I didn’t know!” she pleaded behind us, but her pleas fell on deaf ears as Darren continued until we reached the edge of the woods. The dogs in the barn nearby howled and barked from all the commotion, making it difficult to calm myself as fear iced its way through my veins, my heart hurting with anxiety. I had no idea what Darren had planned, but I really didn’t want to stick around to witness it.

Darren turned to the girl who was trembling so hard I thought she would quiver into a pile of sand.

“I’m giving you one chance,” he said to her, his voice calm but stern. “To run as fast as you can.”

*Oh no...*

The girl looked confused as she peered up at him, eyes filled with frightened tears, her limbs still trembling. Darren lifted his hand and pointed at the trees. “Now, run!”

Like a gunshot had gone off, the girl quickly turned and sprinted into the woods. She tripped several times, barely even making a dent into her escape at all. I looked up to find an evil smirk beginning to form on Darren’s lips, causing my stomach to drop.

*No.*

“Release the dogs,” he ordered.

The sound of a latch being released gripped my attention as I turned to watch ten massive dogs race forward from the barn like a pack of wild wolves out into the woods.

I stood there in absolute shock and horror as the dogs quickly caught up to the girl, her screams suddenly deafening my ears. The trees barely hid the grotesque scene as the dogs ripped the poor girl’s body apart, blood spraying in every direction until her screaming finally stopped. I felt my knees begin to give out, but Darren’s arm around my middle prevented my fall, his low stern voice filling my ears.

“I hope you’ve learned now that the next time I decide to end someone quickly, you’ll be grateful. Don’t ever interfere like that again, Jaden, or I will continue to do it *your way* and make their deaths so much worse. Do you understand?”

I felt myself sway. “Yes, Darren,” I whispered.

Then I heard him chuckle. “Fitting though, isn’t it? Dying by the same offense committed? Now, that’s poetry.”

Darren released me, and only when I no longer felt his presence did I feel safe enough to drop to my knees in the grass. I kneeled there for a while, watching as the dogs continued to gnaw on her mangled body until Clive and Owen finally pulled me to my feet by my arms. Feeling like a numbed-out zombie, I was guided back to the house, back to him – the monster I was being forced to marry in three days.

I woke up on the couch in the bedroom feeling like total shit. My skin shuddered at the flashback of the nightmare I had been running from during my sleep. Dogs. Rabid fucking dogs chasing me through the night in the damn woods, Darren riding behind them on his horse and sneering as he hunted me. I woke when I tripped on a branch and felt the first scratch of teeth at my shoulder. I had already almost been eaten by wolves once. I didn't need to relive that experience even though I just watched someone else live it.

Darren had once saved me from the same fate he'd just condemned that poor girl to. Yet I knew somehow if I argued with him, he would turn it around and blame me. If I hadn't tried to save her life first, if I hadn't interfered, her death would have been quick and painless. I'd learned that with Holly when she was gifted with Darren's bullet rather than some other horrific form of torture I would have had to witness.

A month ago, I wouldn't have batted an eye. I would have just looked on as Darren exerted his brutality and cruelty and not give a damn about the who or why. Anyone associated with him deserved to die as far as I was concerned.

But when I looked in her eyes and realized the truth, I found my exception. Not everyone was here willingly. You were disposed of if you served no purpose, and luckily, that girl had been given another chance at life under a different title when her face was no longer pleasing to the eye. Cleaning was better than fucking by a long shot, but you still weren't free. And now she was dead because my dog had been trained to react the way she had.

Camaro was still sleeping in her kennel next to me, unaware of the turmoil she had just caused. Would she have reacted the same way those hunting dogs had? Camaro was trained to destroy people, to attack without mercy at all costs, and she was very good at what she did. I hadn't seen it in real life yet, just realistic practice drills, but I never wanted to see her hunt someone innocent the way Darren's hunting dogs just had.

I didn't want Camaro to become a monster, but I couldn't help but notice how all my commands as well as Darren's were ignored. Had her mission to protect me overridden all other commands? If she couldn't be controlled, I had no doubt Darren would eliminate her, finding her to be too much of a risk for my safety. That would crush me.

But she and I had both defied his commands today. And there would be consequences for that. I knew watching that girl die wouldn't be enough. I would suffer more, and the thought of what Darren would do to me had my heart skipping in fear. The recollection of his belt whipping my bare back from my time in his basement had me cringing inside. My memories were the chains that often kept me in check.

I could feel each lash, strike after strike until my skin finally split open. I remembered the smile on Darren's face as he wrote his name on my skin with my blood. My screams never ceased, and he fucking enjoyed it. I remembered the satisfaction on his face every time his cock was buried inside me, tears, blood, and semen staining my skin while he brought me to heel. He loved to conquer me, and the fact that I had to continue to withstand that strict regimen was honestly exhausting. But what could I do but endure? Obviously, I was fucking good at it.

Camaro finally stirred then, pulling me from reliving my nightmare. Her body sluggishly rolled to the side so she could sit up and regard me.

"Hey, girl," I said softly, easing my hand through the bars of the kennel to pet her.

Brushing my hands along the side of her head, she turned her nose into my palm and licked me. I sighed at her apology and opened her kennel to let her out. She sat down in front of me, licking her nose as she looked me over. Leaning forward, I put my arms around her, finding comfort in her soft, warm body, and resting my head against her shoulder.

"You caused a lot of trouble today, Camaro," I whispered, running my hands over her fur, attempting to reassure her I was not hurt or mad. She

nudged me with her body, pushing further into me, her snout resting on my shoulder.

We sat there like that for what felt like hours. I didn't have the motivation to move and apparently neither did Camaro. That was until the door opened and Sid walked in.

My eyes found his, confusion draping my face as I wondered why the hell he was in my room.

"Hello, Jaden," he said gently. "Feeling all right? I heard you had some trouble with a horse today." The concern in his voice was fake. He knew I wasn't that fragile and reporting minor discomfort was not something I did. That fucker knew I was just fine. He was simply here to snoop for information for Darren.

"I'm fine, Sid. No pain, no blood, no need for alarm. Thanks."

"That's good to hear," he said lightly, taking another step into the room. "You do appear to be fully intact." His eyes roamed over me, inspecting me from a distance, but it was just for show.

I gave him a nod. "Built like steel, Sid," I grunted as I stood from the floor and headed toward the balcony, Camaro slowly trotting after me. If Sid wanted to talk to me more, he'd have to come out here where we weren't well heard or seen.

The fact that he didn't immediately leave was confirmation that he had more to prod me with.

Camaro followed me out onto the balcony and laid down on the floor next to the chair I sat down in. I listened as Sid slowly made his way outside, sighed, and took a seat in the chair opposite me.

I raised my brows. "Something else on your mind, Sid?"

His lips made a thin line before he finally broached the subject he was really here for.

"I need you to help me understand something, Jaden. You've been so complacent in the last year, witnessed dozens of deaths and torture, and have been through vigorous conditioning practices, yet today, something seemed to just ... snap. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

It was hard for me not to scoff at him.

"You want to know why I suddenly defied Darren and tried to save that girl?" *Correction. Darren wants to know why.*

"Do you know what happened there, Jaden? I thought you knew better than that. Darren is furious."

I nodded, unsurprised and rightfully so. I did know better than that. I knew never to interfere.

"I don't know what happened," I murmured.

"Oh, I think you do. Something set off that reaction, Jaden, and we need to figure out what so it doesn't happen again."

I hated when Sid was right. Something inside me had suddenly just ... snapped. How the fuck had that happened? Was I breaking down? Cracking under some reinforced pressure I was unconsciously fighting against?

And now with Sid prodding, I'd officially put myself back on Darren's radar. Oh, shit. What if he thought I might relapse and go back into my rebellion? If he was as pissed as I thought, I could go back in that fucking basement for this; that had me suddenly shivering inside. My stomach instantly clenched so hard at the thought I almost doubled over. What the fuck had I done?

I had so royally fucked up.

I sniffled back my panic, but the realization of what this could mean had me taking deep heavy breaths. Flashbacks of the months I spent in Darren's basement had me clutching my fists as I brought my knees to my chest. I could hear my own screams echoing in my ears, my skin crawling as it relived all the times Darren made it bruise and bleed. My pussy clenching in preparation ...

"Jaden!"

A sharp smack to the face woke me from my dark trance, and I brought my eyes up to find Sid standing over me, his face awash with alarm.

My eyes wandered away from his face to confirm my surroundings, but he snapped his fingers, attempting to grasp my attention.

"Hey! Hey!" he called, snapping his fingers in front of my face. "Look at me, Jaden. Look at me. Breathe. You're okay. Everything's okay."

Tears filled my eyes to the brim until they finally spilled over. My shoulders began to shake. "Shit," I whispered under my breath, looking away. "I don't want to go back to the basement, Sid. I can't do that again."

Suddenly, Sid became very still, a wave of understanding claiming his gaze as he looked down on me. And just like that, everything clicked for him.

"You're not going back into the basement, Jaden," he said with a sigh. "What happened was not necessarily your fault. It appears it was likely a result of your PTSD. That's all."



I took a deep breath and sniffed back my tears, quickly wiping my face dry while trying to grasp what he was saying.

“What do you mean?”

He released another sigh and sat down in the chair next to me.

“I’ve been waiting for something like this to happen. Frankly, I’m surprised it’s taken this long, but the sooner we can assess your triggers, the sooner we can get them under control.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Jaden, people with PTSD can have episodes of aggression that they can’t really control. Usually something triggers that aggression, so let’s try to figure out what it was that triggered you.”

I looked away from him and stared into the distance. Sid diagnosed me with PTSD last year, and while I had become withdrawn, depressed, and fearful, I hadn’t really acted out like that before – where I lose my self-control and snap like that. But I already knew what triggered me, and I doubted I would ever be able to silence it.

“Do you know who that girl was, Sid?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I do not.”

“Me either, but when I looked in her eyes, I knew where she came from. She hadn’t been a maid her whole life. When I saw the scars on her face, I knew right then and there she used to be trafficked. And I just ... wanted to save her from him.”

Sid nodded, exhaling quietly as he took in my words.

“I think that’s a fair assumption. And if that truly is your trigger, then we now need to create a plan to handle it.”

I turned my head to him, suddenly fearful. “Handle it how?”

“I’ll discuss it with Darren, and we’ll figure out a new form of therapy to combat your triggers.”

I felt myself start to panic again, my breathing rising and heart fluttering. That sounded fucking terrifying.

“No, no, no, wait, Sid. Can’t we discuss this amongst ourselves and I can decide what works best?”

He shook his head. “You know that’s not how this works.”

I choked back a sob. Darren was going to destroy me. I had to do something to convince him that I was fine, that I didn’t need whatever therapy he thought was best because he probably thought that meant he’d have to reprogram me or something. And fuck that.

I took a deep breath and released it slowly, attempting to empty myself from all the anguish that was threatening to swallow me again. I was not going back in that fucking basement. I had to fix this. And I knew just how to do it.

This needed to be a quick fix, simple discipline and nothing more if we were going to move past this. I could not allow their solution to become a long-term plan. I just hoped the bruises would disappear before the wedding.

I wiped the remaining tears from my face and abruptly stood, forcing Sid to lean back in his chair as I began to pace back and forth. Camaro raised onto her front paws as she watched me, a quiet bark catching my attention. I gave her a small glance before the knots in my stomach began to tear me apart. This was going to suck.

“All right, fine then. But do me a favor first, Sid,” I began. “Why don’t you go and tell your master that if he wants to know something, he should stop sending in his pawns for the queen to destroy.”

Sid needed to stop acting like the damn middleman before it got him killed, by me. He had to be shittiest doctor/ therapist known to man.

He raised his brows in shock. “I’m going to advise against that, Jaden.”

“Do I look like I fucking care?” I snarled.

Sid scoffed at that and stood to leave. “Good luck, Jaden,” he said confidently. “You’re going to need it.”

“No shit.” *That was the point.*

“Okay, with everything else taken care of, that just leaves Jaden’s fitting, which is scheduled for tomorrow. Does that work, Darren?”

Regina sat across from my desk with her portfolio of the wedding laid out between us as she went over the details I had left her to. As annoying as she was, she did still have some use, luckily for her, though the only real reason was because Matt asked me to get her the fuck out of his house and out of his hair as a personal favor. He owed me big time for this. At least Regina did know how to organize just about anything, and I could commemorate her resourcefulness. Scott was currently commemorating her fake tits as he stood off beside me.

“How long should it take them to have it ready?” I asked.

“I have three seamstresses handling it. It shouldn’t take them very long.”

“Good. Anything else?”

Regina pursed her lips before finally gently shaking her head. “Nope, I think that’s all.”

“Great. That’s all I needed then,” I said and turned away from her.

As she gathered everything from my desk, her head suddenly popped back up. “Oh wait, there was one other thing I just remembered. During the ceremony, the officiant needs to know if you’re including the pause for objections to the wedding.”

I paused for a moment myself, certain I had misheard her, but when I turned to look at her, the innocent doe-eyed expression on Regina’s face confirmed I was not mistaken.

Fury filled my chest as I regarded Regina to answer her stupid fake question. “You think someone would be stupid enough to voice an objection at my own wedding?”

I watched as the confidence slowly drained from her eyes, but her voice attempted to remain small and playful. “Someone might ...”

I couldn’t stop myself from bursting out with laughter. Regina may have been good at her job, but she was still a fucking idiot. Her innocent face turned angry as she glared at me.

“Regina, get the fuck out of my office. And tell the officiant that unless he wants to turn my wedding into a funeral, then he should think twice before allowing a moment for objections during the ceremony. Because if anyone says a single thing, it’s going to be a very bloody wedding. Got it?”

Regina nodded quickly, her eyes looking everywhere but at mine. As she gathered the rest of her things, a knock came on the door.

“What?” I shouted, and the door opened, Sid popping his head through the frame.

“Ready?” he asked me. I waved him in, ready to figure out what the fuck I needed to do about my future wife.

Regina tsked as she walked past him. “Aw, did the little redhead have another tantrum?” she asked snidely.

“Regina!” I bellowed, causing her to jump a full foot away from Sid. “One more fucking word out of your stupid, worthless mouth, and I’ll make sure your next lip job involves sewing them shut. Got it? Now, get the fuck out.”

Her eyes bulged out of her head before she quickly nodded and raced for the door.

Sid shook his head as he sat down. “Of all the women who have come and gone around you, that one requires a damn straight jacket and a muzzle the most.”

“You can suggest it to Matt the next time you see him. He stopped listening to me,” I replied. “Now, what did you get from Jaden?”

I was still fucking fuming over her little interference earlier today, though the satisfaction of that idiot maid’s death eased the raging beast inside me somewhat. I couldn’t fucking believe Jaden had done what she did. Not only had she successfully caused a misfire, something that rarely happened and never by her, but she also felt bold enough to actually physically interfere with my decisions. That was unacceptable. She had somehow suddenly become comfortable enough to challenge me like she had with Holly. She knew better than that.

In the last year, I’d shown her so many times how bloody my world could be just because I wanted it that way, and still she defied me. Maybe she was finally just growing numb from it all. She lacked the sensitivity she had way back when we first started, which was an improvement. But preventing a simple bullet to the head was stepping far over Jaden’s bounds. She would have to be punished over this. And she knew it.

But we were three days before the wedding, and I wanted her smiling as she walked down the aisle, eager to meet me at that altar, but at this point, it just felt like wishful thinking. I knew better than to expect anything less. I almost felt hopeless putting this wretched puzzle together that was Jaden, breaking down her psyche and remolding it to fit my needs. But this reaction was new – an error – and it required correcting immediately.

Sid shook his head. “I don’t know why you bother to keep me at this with her. She knows why I’m there every time.”

“Because it lets her know I’m on her tail. It forces her to keep herself in check. And whatever you learn helps me prepare for the next step before I handle her myself.”

Sid held his hands up and bowed his head. “Whatever you want, Darren.”

I started twirling a pencil in my hand, impatiently waiting for him to tell me what I wanted to know.

Sid took a deep breath and began. “You know Jaden still suffers from PTSD,” he started.

I nodded. Of course, I knew that. It didn't take his diagnosis to determine that.

"It's clear to me her interference today was an episode resulting from her PTSD. She was triggered, so she reacted without thinking. That's very typical of someone with this kind of condition."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What was the trigger?"

"She thought the maid was a whore in the past, which made her want to protect her from you."

I scoffed. Typical little Jaden trying to save the world from me. As if she even stood a chance.

"What made her think that?" She was correct, of course. Not much got past her; her damn observational skills were too impressive for her own good.

"She said she saw it in her eyes, but it was the scars on her face that gave it away."

I smirked. Jaden was a smart girl, capable of connecting the dots even when I thought the dots weren't relevant.

"But the good news is she recognized the trigger almost immediately, so now we just need to figure out the right therapy to correct her reactions. There are a couple of options we could discuss."

I nodded in agreement. Obviously, I couldn't have Jaden reacting like that just because she *thought* someone had been or was a whore. She needed to move past this quickly.

"We'll start with exposure therapy. The only time she's ever been exposed to that side of my business is when she was at the warehouse. We'll reintroduce her to it so she can accept what is, adapt, and move on."

Sid looked uncomfortable. "I'm not quite sure if that's the best approach to begin with. Maybe a slower approach, something a little less drastic would be better to start—"

"No," I stated, cutting him off. "She's been exposed to plenty of violence in a short period of time and handles the bloodshed just fine. She's seen me skin a man alive, for fuck's sake. The best way to get Jaden to flourish is to throw her in the deep end and force her to swim. That's how she thrives."

The look of defeat was starting to capture Sid's features. "When do you plan to implement this?"

“We’ll start during the honeymoon. A business associate is holding an auction in Rome toward the end of next week. His are relatively ... tame. She can start with that one.”

Sid sighed, sagging his shoulders before sitting forward and looking me right in the eye.

“This time, Darren, I have to disagree with you. I spent months working with that girl to redevelop her personality and behavioral traits – for you. If you do this, you will ruin her all over again, and she will hate you for it. Is that really how you want to start your marriage?”

If I could have set him on fire with my looks alone, I would have.

“I’d be very cautious right now if I were you, Sid. You may be an asset to my organization, but you are not the only brain surgeon on this planet with a revoked license who can be bought.”

Sid’s mouth formed a tight line before he found the courage to open it again.

“I meant no disrespect,” he said, his palms raised in a surrender. “I am just trying to help you keep Jaden in an agreeable state. You value my opinion for a reason, and I wouldn’t be doing my job if I just agreed with you all the time; especially when I thought you were doing something reckless.”

I raised my brows. “Reckless? You find my methods reckless?”

“I think you put more pressure on Jaden than she deserves. She’s finally acclimating well to this life and to introduce something that she clearly hates in such an abrasive way will slow her progress. In fact, it could even reverse it. If you take her to an auction, she will react the same way the body reacts when a bucket of ice water is dumped over it. And I don’t think you’ll be pleased with the results.”

I shook my head and almost started to laugh. “You are being uncharacteristically noble, Sid. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you actually care about Jaden.”

“And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you love torturing her,” he countered boldly.

Heat started to travel through my chest, pouring into my blood, and flooding my senses with a raw rage I fought to control. Killing Sid was the last thing I wanted to do, but he was suddenly making it very difficult to resist.

“As if you didn’t already know that,” I replied with a sneer. “But my actions do not need to be justified to you, Sid. She is mine to do with as I please, and she will fit any desire or need I require. Whether that means taking my cock, my belt, or bearing my fucking children, she will do it because that’s what’s expected of her. And she is strong enough to handle it. Do not be so easily manipulated by her to think otherwise.”

Sid scoffed. “She has frequent panic attacks and nightmares of going back into the basement. Is that not a concern of yours?”

An evil grin curved in the corner of my lips. I couldn’t help it, but reflecting on the months spent in the basement of my estate with Jaden made my blood rush, my cock growing harder at the memorized sound of her screaming, her crying ... her begging. Fuck, those days of transition were intoxicating. And she was afraid of going back? Excellent.

“Good,” I stated. “That fear keeps her in check.”

Sid hesitated before swallowing back the lump in his throat he was now trying to hide.

“Well, I soothed that fear and told her she had nothing to worry about.”

I glared at him. “You had no authority to tell her that.” If I wanted Jaden buried in the fucking floorboards, that’s where she’d fucking go.

“I’m sure Jaden already knows that,” he said carefully.

*Smart girl.*

“But she also knows she needs to correct what she did. In fact, against my better judgment, she told me to give you a message.”

My brow rose of their own accord, surprised at this bold move. “Did she now?”

He nodded. “She told me to go and tell my master that if he wants to know something, he should stop sending in his pawn for the queen to destroy.”

The pencil I’d been twirling in my hand suddenly snapped.

I didn’t even remember how I got to the bedroom door, I just remembered kicking it in until it was left hanging off its hinges. Barging in, I found Jaden standing in the middle of the room, dressed in her workout clothes, staring right at me with her hands at her side balled into little fists. Camaro barked and whined from inside her cage as it rattled and shook, clearly not approving of my entrance.

“Anticipating something?” I asked her, my blood raging from her obvious provocation.

She took one deep breath before answering me. “Always.”

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I took a few more steps inside the room, my eyes taking in Jaden's position, the one she always stood in when she was preparing for a fight – her body turned to the side, knees slightly bent, back heel raised, hands wavering – completely loose and ready ... and absolutely sexy as fuck.

This girl I fucking craved like heroin.

But it wasn't just her stance that gave her away, it was the way she looked at me. With those narrowed brows and stone-cold expression, you couldn't mistake the flames in her eyes if you tried. They were the very same ones that still secretly burned for my destruction. And the addict in me still loved to fan them.

"I'm sorry my *pawns* aren't up to your standards of destruction. It appears you need something more durable."

She smirked. "Now you're catching on."

I moved toward her, cracking my knuckles and staring her down. She was going to wear so many of my handprints tonight.

"So, let's get right to it then. Why did you defend that girl?" I already knew the answer, of course, but I needed to hear things from her.

"Because I didn't think her death was warranted or fair," she answered almost immediately.

"And since the fuck when did you think that was enough reason to interfere?" My anger was on the rise again.

"Since that very moment I no longer cared."

My eyebrows rose as Jaden glared back at me, and I almost started to laugh at the audacity. These were the moments when I toyed back and forth between unleashing this rebellious side of her just so I could crush her back into submission. I fucking lived for it.

“Sounds like someone’s forgotten her place again,” I stated, rolling my shoulders and cracking my neck.

Jaden narrowed her gaze at me and took a hard step forward.

“Wrong. I know exactly where it is. And you’re going to accept it and like it. Right now.”

My head turned to the side while a large smile crept up my lips. She was so cute and sexy when she was angry and trying to face off with me. We both knew how it always ended.

“Oh, princess,” I said with a smirk, placing my hands in my pants pockets. “Please enlighten me.”

Jaden took two steps toward me, grabbed my tie, and yanked. “In less than three days from now, I’m not going to be your fucking little princess anymore, you condescending asshole. I’ll be your goddamn queen. You’d better smarten up and start acting like it.”

With my cock ready to burst through my pants, I grabbed Jaden’s throat and wrenched her toward me. Her hand pulled my tie tighter, but her eyes never left mine. Her breathing became heavy as her chest heaved, her mouth open with invitation.

Like I fucking needed one.

Turning, I quickly slammed her down onto the bed, my body instantly covering hers and trapping her underneath me.

“There’s my girl,” I drawled.

With that lustful gaze in her eyes, Jaden yanked my tie even more, and I didn’t fight her as I lowered myself to claim her perfect lips with my own. It was all the distraction she needed to shift slightly to free to her legs and wrap them tightly around my torso, locking me to her.

She became an animal then, clawing at my clothes, scratching at my skin, moaning for what only I could give her. I was not one to deny her very often, especially when she was like this.

Our clothes hit the floor in shreds, buttons flying in every direction, and for the next hour, the room was filled with nothing but screams of her pain and my satisfaction. Jaden’s ass was black and blue while my chest and back bore claw marks worthy of a fucking wolf. A red ring circled Jaden’s throat while my bottom lip began to swell. But I didn’t give a single fuck about it.

Her silky red hair was wrapped around my fist as I drove into her from behind. Her sweet pussy clung to my cock as she took everything I had. She

was going to come again, but not before I was ready.

Reaching forward, I gripped her throat and pulled her back against my chest. My other hand released her hair, moving lower to pinch her nipples and lower still to play with her clit. More of Jaden's moans filled the air, that sound taking over and sending me into oblivion.

Sweet euphoria came as a rush of bliss flowed through my body, my cum filling Jaden entirely and sending her over the edge for the third time. After catching my breath, I pushed her forward to lay on the bed, my body still covering hers and loving the feel of her soft and flushed skin against mine. And even as exhausted as I was, I still wasn't quite finished. I had one more point to make.

Grazing my teeth along the side of her neck, I bit down just enough to catch her attention before whispering in her ear.

"You may be the queen soon, Jaden, but don't ever forget who you belong to. You know how easily I can turn a crown into a cage."

She didn't say a word, just turned her head and kissed me with enough force to push me back. Her tongue wrapped around my own and drew me further into her, making me want to fuck her all over again.

When she pulled back, her teeth nipped at my lip and a smirk formed across her mouth.

Fuck – if I could love someone, it would be her.

Pulling away, I went into the bathroom and nearly laughed at the state of myself as I looked in the mirror. She made a hot mess out of me. After cleaning up, I changed into a fresh suit and stepped back into the bedroom to find Jaden sleeping under the sheets.

I decided the message was received and walked out, passing Clive and Owen at the doors.

"Make sure she's awake in an hour and ready for dinner," I said as I kept walking.

I wasn't about to have my *queen* thinking she could sleep the rest of the day away.

When the door was closed and I knew Darren was long gone, I turned on my side, and rested my head in my hand, staring ahead at nothing. My entire body hummed, pulsing with the kind of agony only Darren could deliver, reminding me of his satisfaction, and so, my victory. It didn't take long for the smallest of smiles to creep along my face.

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The following day, I endured my wedding dress fitting with Regina and the head seamstress, Martha. It took Regina all of two seconds to verbally acknowledged all the bruising that covered my pale skin from the day before, the slight discoloration of my wrists and neck easily visible in the dress that revealed much more than I was hoping.

“Damn. I thought I heard someone was a bad little girl yesterday,” Regina teased as she looked me up and down. “You look like a fucking walking disease.”

“Best shut the fuck up then so I don’t infect you,” I snarled, wishing my looks alone were capable of murder. I was so not in the mood for her shit today.

“Now, now, ladies,” Martha intervened, looking a little uncomfortable as she looked me over. “Let’s just get you fitted and on your way.”

*Good plan.*

“Well, thank God for airbrush,” Regina muttered.

I numbed myself out while the two of them fussed over me in making sure the dress fit me like a goddamn glove. One look at myself in the mirror, and I already hated the damn thing.

It was everything I didn’t want. Mermaid silhouette, super tight, incredibly restrictive. And undeniably deliberate by Darren.

The dress itself was absolutely gorgeous by its own right, but it just wasn’t me.

I couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of it.

When I was finally back in my regular clothes, I thanked Martha for her help and focused on not racing out of that room, leaving Regina behind to

chat with her about her own dress. Clive and Owen were waiting outside the room, snickering at my obvious irritation from the fitting. Fuckers.

Rounding the hall, I made my way toward the foyer, intent on taking Camaro for a walk when I noticed a small blonde standing near the bottom of the stairway, surrounded by luggage and the movement of the staff. When she eventually turned her head, I found myself quickening my step.

“Kayla?”

Her eyes found mine instantly, the blue unmistakable, but it was quickly blocked by a hard body in my way. Darren’s arm came around my middle, hauling me away from the stairwell and into a random office. I could hear Camaro barking behind the door until Clive and Owen hushed her.

“Hey! Put me down!” I griped, struggling to get out of Darren’s hold. “Was that Kayla? What is she doing here?”

“Quiet down,” he ordered, and I instantly shut my mouth, demanding he answer me through the glare in my eyes. “You’re finished with your fitting already?”

I tried not to huff at his lack of response, but Darren’s answers always came first.

“Yes, I finished. The dress fits great, though I’m not happy about the lack of mobility,” I stated.

Darren chuckled, that smile easing the tension in my stomach. “You won’t need to worry about your mobility, Jaden. I doubt I’ll be able to put you down the entire night.”

I scoffed. “That may actually be necessary. The shoes they put me in were killing my feet. Now, please tell me what Kayla is doing here?”

Darren released a heavy breath, his dark blue eyes giving me the look he always gives me when I’m too persistent. I should back down, but I can’t. The last time I saw her was back at Matt’s house, the very same night Darren destroyed me.

“Kayla is here because I asked Matt to bring her.”

I furrowed my brows. “Why?”

“Because I thought you might like to see her at our wedding,” he said softly.

My eyebrows raised of their own accord. Darren rarely did something for me that didn’t somehow benefit him. He wasn’t fooling anyone, but still, the idea was nice.

“Well, that was very nice of you,” I said sweetly. “I’d love to have Kayla at our wedding. Will she be allowed to eat at the dinner table, or will she require a fancy pillow for the floor?”

Darren never much cared for my sarcasm, but if Matt was here without Kayla, I could at least appreciate the fact he wasn’t tormenting her at the moment. She’d get some peace from his absence. Hopefully.

“She’ll be sitting with us at our table,” Darren answered, though his tone proved he was less than happy with my question.

“So she won’t have any restrictions?”

Darren glared at me. “She’ll always have restrictions, Jaden, just like you. But, I’ve asked Matt to be a little more lenient for a few days, for you. He’s allowed it as your wedding present.”

*How nice of him to give Kayla a break on my behalf.*

“How thoughtful. Can I see her?”

Darren’s impatience was showing again, but he should have expected how eager I would be to see her.

“Wait here. I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he said and walked out the door, allowing Camaro to rush in and sniff me all over.

“I’m fine, big girl,” I said, petting her head and jostling her ears.

For ten minutes, I paced the room, my heart pounding in my chest as I waited to see the only friend I had in this world. At least I hoped she was still my friend.

It’d been a year since I’d seen her. What if she was different? What if Matt had successfully conditioned her as I feared? Could I still even trust her?

Finally, the door opened and in walked Kayla. Darren stood behind her and slowly closed the door. I didn’t miss the not-so-subtle warning in his eyes, though.

Once the door was closed, Kayla moved toward me but was immediately halted in her tracks by Camaro, who was now snarling and barking at her.

“Camaro, down,” I ordered, and she instantly quieted before sitting back on her hind legs with a gruff. Kayla breathed a sigh of relief but didn’t take another step.

Moving around my dog, I pulled Kayla in for the hug we both desperately needed. I felt her sag against me, her arms tightening around my shoulders before she finally started to relax.

“Are you okay?” I whispered softly in her ear.

“Yes,” she replied, sniffing back her emotion and pulling away from me. “You?”

“Been better,” I said with a smirk.

I looked Kayla up and down. She still looked the same, but her blond hair was much longer and curled at the ends. She wore a skintight dark purple dress that stopped just below her ass with sparkly four-inch gold heels on her feet. With her heavy makeup, she looked like a damn Barbie doll. But a crushing weight filled my chest when I recognized a familiar diamond studded silver collar around her neck. The only difference was her stones were blue, matching her eyes in the most tragic of ways.

*Oh, Kayla.*

Her eyes softened when she noticed where my focus was.

“My body eventually rejected the other tracker. Plus, I guess Matt likes the look and functionality,” she answered for me.

“I’m sorry,” I added, hoping he didn’t utilize the damn shock capability.

She shrugged, brushing off my concern. “So, what’s going on?” she asked. “Matt said we were here for some kind of event but didn’t tell me what or where.”

I felt my eyes bulge in shock. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head.

*Well, fuck. I guess I get to give her the good news.*

“I’m getting married, Kayla,” I said quietly, holding my hand out so she could see the ring.

Snatching my hand like a damn snake, she turned it around for her to see. Her eyes lit up as she looked over the giant obnoxious thing, her mouth starting to turn into a grimace.

“To him?” she asked hesitantly.

She knew the damn answer, but I nodded anyway.

“Why?” Her tone was incredulous, and though I could understand her confusion, she should know better than to ask for an explanation for literally anything anymore.

“Because he wants me to? It’s always been on his agenda.”

“And you’ve agreed?” she asked, her voice clearly shocked and upset.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Did you expect me to have a choice?”

She huffed. “Well, no, I guess not, but you already seem so ... accepting of it.”



I eyed her carefully. “You know there’s no point in fighting him. He’d no sooner drag me down the aisle by my hair if I said no.”

Kayla released my hand and rubbed her temples, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

“I know. I just thought you’d be more ... resilient.”

*What the fuck? Was she testing me or something?*

I folded my arms in front of my chest to resist the urge of slapping her.

“And how far do you think that would have gotten me? You have no idea what I’ve endured since the last time we saw each other, Kayla, and I refuse to go back there. I’m doing what I have to in order to survive, and that means making Darren happy. So that’s what I’m going to do. I’m sorry you didn’t get to witness my earlier rebellion, but that part of my life is over. I’m moving forward, not backward.”

Kayla exhaled another heavy breath and plopped herself down onto the sofa, wrapping her arms tightly around herself.

“I know, you’re right. I just ... are you giving up?” she whispered. Her eyes were glassy as she lifted her head to look at me. My heart fucking broke in half.

I marched over to her, dropped to my knees, and pulled her into another hug, resting my chin on her shoulder.

“I need you to trust me, Kayla. This is all part of the plan.”

A strong tremble ruptured through her, but after a moment, she seemed to pull herself together.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said with a sniffle.

She wasn’t the only one.

After Jaden and Kayla were finished with the little lunch date I scheduled for them, I had Matt bring Kayla into my office for a small chat. He had her sit down on the brown leather couch in front of my desk, his hands on her shoulders holding her there until she understood she was not to move. Her entire body was stiff, her shoulders hunched as if she were cold while her hands stayed folded on her knees. Her eyes remained focused on the floor in front of her.

*Such a good little girl.*

“Hello, Kayla,” I said politely, barely withholding the smugness of my voice.

“Hello,” she replied quietly. It was obvious how uncomfortable she was, which was understandable, considering all the things I was responsible for with her life. She could thank me later.

“Did you enjoy your lunch with Jaden?”

“Yes, I did. Thank you very much.” Her voice remained timid, her eyes still on the floor.

“You’re welcome. And now that I’ve done something nice for you, I need you to do something for me,” I said.

Her eyes stayed on the floor, but her brows knitted together in confusion. Matt turned from his view of the window to glare at Kayla.

“Kayla, look at him when he talks to you,” he chastised. Her eyes immediately met mine, fear coating those beautiful blue irises. It made me smirk.

“W-What do you need me to do?”

“The wedding is tomorrow, and I know Jaden isn’t particularly excited about it.”

Kayla’s stare went wide, little gasp exiting her mouth. “Oh, I don’t know about that, I think she’s just nerv—”

I held my hand up to cut her off. “Don’t try to lie to cover for her. I know her better than she thinks. There is not much she can hide from me.”

She swallowed hard.

“With that being said, I still want Jaden to enjoy herself on our wedding night, which is where you come in. Your job is to make sure she eats, drinks, though not too much, and dances. Make sure she smiles and has a good time. Think you can do that?”

Her brows came together again before she answered, her tone completely changed.

“Sorry, but isn’t that your job as her new husband?”

*Sassy little smartass. I can see why Jaden likes her.*

“Kayla,” Matt chided, but I held my hand up to wave him off.

“Unfortunately, I’ll be absent for a good part of the reception, so I need you to keep Jaden distracted for a while. Unless you’d rather have Matt keep you locked up for the entire day?”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek before changing her attitude. “I’ll do what I can.”

“See that you succeed,” I retorted, my voice dark with warning.

She nodded.

“Come on, Kayla,” Matt said, directing her out of my office. She rose and followed, the sour look on her face softening only a little as she walked over to Matt, who led her outside. “Take her to our room. She doesn’t leave,” he said to the guard who waited outside the door. When she was gone, he closed the door and sat down on the couch.

“That ass is gonna be so black and blue tonight,” he said with a scowl.

I chuckled. “Now you have something to look forward to later. You’re welcome.”

Matt smirked. “So ... you think he’s really going to show up tomorrow?”

“Like he’d miss this opportunity? My whole family together at once, drunk and completely distracted? It’s perfect.”

Patience was a virtue, and it was finally paying off. Because Benjamin Carter had officially found his balls and left his little nest to fly into the big

boy world with Antonio Moochii, another scorned past business partner. Good. I could kill two birds with one stone then.

According to one of my many underground informants I had Scott implant, a plot to attack my wedding had been put into motion. A total of about ten men had been hired as guns with Carter and Moochii leading the group. Evidently, Carter partnered up with Mooch when he found out I cut him loose after a construction project had gone wrong with Dominic in Vegas last year.

For once, Dominic's head was in the right place and caught Mooch lying about his assets, which were not nearly as good as he led on, and expected us to front the entire bill. I didn't deal with liars. Ever. So the deal was off and he lost all of what little investors he did have. He didn't get much business after that once I'd blacklisted him.

"Sounds like it's going to be one hell of a party," Matt said with a smirk.

I smiled. "I'm going to enjoy gutting the fuck out of both of them."

"Hope you've got a spare tux on hand."

"Got three."

Matt grinned. "Good. Now let's go get drunk for your bachelor party."

After my lunch with Kayla, I felt uplifted enough to go for a quick run with Camaro, but I made sure to steer clear of the barns. As we ran, we watched the workers begin to set up for tomorrow's ceremony, and I immediately lost my motivation. I didn't really want to see any more wedding preparations.

Heading back into our room, Camaro went straight for her bed as I aimed for the shower, washing away the anxiety that was starting to rise again.

*It's just a wedding, Jaden, not an execution. Calm down.*

Wasn't it, though?

Hearing the door to the bathroom shut, I turned off the shower and gently pushed the stall door open. My eyes immediately connected with Darren's steel gaze, causing my gut to shrink in surprise. He then raised his arms and held an open towel up for me, encouraging me to step into it. Darren's face remained impassioned as he carefully dabbed my face dry with the corners of the towel before draping it around me completely.

He then leaned against the bathroom counter, folding his arms in front of his massive chest with a blank expression across his face. I felt my fingers clutch the towel tighter to my body. I hated those blank expressions. I couldn't read them very well, and in my position, that was dangerous.

"You have your bachelorette party to attend tonight," he suddenly said.

I fucking snorted.

Recognizing my mistake, I brought my hand to my mouth to cover my laughter, but froze when I realized he wasn't joking.

"Seriously?"

“Yes, seriously. I planned a little girls’ night in for you,” Darren said, his voice taking on a tone of amusement.

I furrowed my brows. “And who will be attending?”

Did I have some imaginary girlfriends I didn’t know of?

“Kayla, Regina, and Katherine,” he answered, a tiny hint of a smirk appearing in the corner of his lips.

The fact that Katherine was included had me intrigued. I didn’t even know she was here yet, but I couldn’t let Darren see my interest. However, hearing Regina’s name on that list had me physically cringing without restraint.

“Is it too late to amend that guest list?”

A soft chuckle rumbled from Darren’s throat. “Let me guess. Regina?”

“Bingo.”

Darren smirked. For some reason, he enjoyed my distaste of his former fuck buddy, but I didn’t know why. If I reacted the same way he did about past relationships, she would have been gutted and scattered for the sharks to finish by now. But it wasn’t jealousy that made me hate her; she was just a straight up fucking bitch with a bad attitude.

“She’ll be on her best behavior tonight. Matt promised,” Darren assured.

“So, she’ll be slightly less annoying than usual?” I could hardly stand to be around that twat for more than two seconds as it was. She was lucky I tolerated her at all for all the wedding planning she was allegedly doing.

“What’s the matter, princess? Are you telling me you can’t handle her?” Darren asked, challenge rising in his voice, but I wasn’t going to take the bait.

“I don’t trust her, Darren. She’s nothing but bad news and fake hair.”

He laughed again, stepping closer to me and causing my skin to tingle with awareness of his proximity.

“She’s not a threat to you, princess. If she were, you wouldn’t have to worry about seeing her ever again.”

Why was he protecting her? I thought she didn’t mean shit to him anymore.

“And if I decide that she is?” I asked, challenge emanating from my voice. I wanted to see how far he would let me take this. Would there be a time when he would let me decide who lives and who dies without his permission?

“Then I’ll handle it. She’s Matt’s cousin. I can’t just go killing the close family members of my allies whenever I want.”

*Yet.*

“No? Afraid of retribution?” I was pushing it now, but this was a topic I wanted to exploit. Darren was being uncharacteristically open right now, and I needed to see how far I could take this, see how much he would reveal.

Darren’s eyes went dark, his jaw clenching as he stepped closer to me. My skin continued to warm, my senses aware of the potential danger if I didn’t tread carefully.

“Would you like to see how I handle retribution, Jaden?” His voice was soft and low, that dangerous tone sending knots to my stomach, but I remained passive. “If you’d like, you can ask all the bodies I’ve buried over the years just so you can confirm what you already know.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, refusing to be intimidated by his history of violence. “I don’t need to confirm anything, Darren. I’m just concerned with how far your ‘allies’ can push the line before it’s crossed.”

Darren’s brows furrowed. “Not even close to being a concern of yours. Now if you’re finished with pushing your fiancé, you need to get ready.”

I huffed and turned to leave the bathroom to change. “Fine, but if Regina says one thing to me that pisses *me* off, I’m knocking her ass out.”

“Noted.”

After changing into a short black pleated skirt and a dark purple T-shirt, Darren let the fact that I slipped into some simple black Vans slide as we headed for the stairs to the foyer together. Camaro walked by my side while Darren held my hand as he escorted me down the steps to find Clive and Owen waiting for me like usual.

“So what am I allowed to do at my bachelorette party?” I asked. “I assume there will be a lack of male strippers, so where’s the entertainment going to come from?”

Darren actually had the decency to crack a smile instead of the backhand I half expected.

“Considering your outlook on life, I doubt you would find much entertainment in sending an oblivious man straight to his death, so I’ll spare you. Unfortunately, you’ll have to entertain yourselves, but I don’t think you’ll have much trouble with that.”

“So I can get drunk and go skinny dipping in the lake then?”

Darren turned and gave me a look, his telltale sign I was being an obnoxious brat, but there were days when I just couldn’t help but tease him when I was feeling brave enough. His stern ass needed it sometimes.

“While I do want you to have some fun tonight, use your best judgment, Jaden. Don’t do something you know will disappoint me. That shouldn’t be too difficult for you, should it?”

“Well, shit, there goes all the fun,” I whined, throwing my arms up in exaggeration.

Darren tapped two fingers against my cheek and scowled at me. “Mouth,” he warned.



Scrunching my face up, I tried to stay playful. “You know, I think you’re already impeding on my party. Don’t you have somewhere to be? Like your own bachelor party, or are you too busy for that?”

Darren chuckled and casually placed his hands in his pockets.

“Actually, you’re right. I do have my own party to attend, but I wanted to make sure you were all set before I took off. Regina may have set something up for you, but I have a strong feeling you’ll be deviating from that plan.”

“And screw up all of Regina’s hard work? Absolutely.” Whatever she had planned, I had zero intention of following that shit. No thanks.

Darren grinned. “There’s my little hellcat. Order whatever you want for dinner, stay light on the booze, and be in bed by midnight. Think you can manage that?”

“Yes, fairy godmother. I wouldn’t want to turn into a pumpkin on the eve of my wedding.”

“Good girl,” Darren praised and leaned down to kiss me.

His hands wrapped themselves around my jawline, his thumbs caressing the underside of my cheeks and stealing the breath from my lungs. I hated it, but these little moments of affection were treasures to me. As if I could collect them like precious gems and hide them away in a jar so I could show myself all the times I’d been good and made Darren happy. The more gems I collected, the safer I felt inside.

When Darren released my lips, he leaned his forehead against mine, resting it there for a moment and taking a deep breath. Realizing I probably wouldn’t see him until tomorrow afternoon, I curled my hands around his wrists and gave him a gentle squeeze. It wasn’t a second later he kissed my forehead and released me.

“Have fun tonight, princess, but try to behave yourself,” he said and then walked out the front door where I could see several headlights waiting for him. I could only imagine the trouble *he* would be getting into tonight.

Turning to my left, I headed down the hallway toward the sitting room where I heard feminine voices while Clive and Owen trailed behind me. Turning the corner, I found my lips forming into a tight grimace when I my eyes were instantly assaulted by a vision of hot pink and silver glitter.

“Jaden!” I heard Kayla gasp in surprise. She was mid-tapping a paper decoration of an engagement ring on the wall.

“Well, there she is,” Regina called smoothly as she sauntered toward me, holding several strands of hot pink beaded necklaces in her hands, a fresh smirk on her face. “Our *little* bride-to-be.” She was wearing skinny jeans, a way too tight red top that showed off more cleavage than I ever wanted to see in my life, and hot pink fuck-me heels. Her fake dark red hair fell in long heavy waves, and her makeup was definitely porn-star worthy. Did she miss the memo that we were staying in tonight?

She looked down and practically scowled down at my dog. “Is she going to be with us the entire night?”

“I told you before, Regina,” I said, standing to my full puny height. “Camaro doesn’t often leave my side.”

“I don’t see why she can’t be away from you for just one night.”

I smiled with a shrug. “Darren’s rules, not mine. You’ll have to take it up with him.” Though it wasn’t a rule I minded. I preferred to have my dog with me almost everywhere I went. She may be my guard dog, but she also my emotional support when my anxiety got the better of me.

“Hmm ... maybe I will,” she said smoothly as if that was somehow an invitation.

*Go for it, bitch. See how far it gets you.*

“Hey, now’s not the time to whine over a dog. She’s practically one of the girls anyway,” Kayla said gently, stepping over to me and embracing me with a short hug. “I don’t mind her ... even if she tried to bite my head off earlier.”

I smiled as Kayla tried to pat the top of Camaro’s head; she actually let her. Progress.

Kayla was also dressed to the nines in her black, white, and gold printed dress. She wore black flats, her hair had a slight bouncy curl to it, and she’d applied light makeup. Cute as always.

“Hi, Jaden,” said a soft voice from the corner of the room. I hadn’t even noticed Katherine sitting in an armchair near the window. Her honey blond hair fell past her shoulders in soft waves over a tight gray cardigan, white blouse, and black pencil skirt. Her modest outfit made her look like she just got home from an office job, which wasn’t something I envisioned Darren’s brother preferring his wife to wear, but maybe he mandated her modesty too.

She rose from her chair, her black heels clicking against the hard wood of the floor as she moved toward me, a soft smile on her face that revealed

rosy cheeks and very little makeup. She was gorgeous enough without it. She had a strange sort of gracefulness in her step, an aura of innocence that almost made me feel like I could trust her. But that was never true in this world. I was even leery of Kayla at this point.

“I just wanted to offer my congratulations again and to thank you for including me tonight,” she said, her voice smooth like butter. I hadn’t gotten to pay much attention to Katherine at any of the other events, but now, I officially had her all to myself. “If there’s ever anything I can do to ease the transition of married life, please just let me know.”

Well, if that wasn’t an open invitation for information, I didn’t know what was. Maybe Katherine was on my side after all. She’d been in the same position as I was once. No wonder Darren didn’t want me to befriend her. So why did he allow her to attend tonight?

“Thanks. And I’m sure I’ll need to take you up on that at some point,” I replied with the tiniest little wink. “Where’s Ella?”

“She’s upstairs with the nanny. Dan is giving me a little break tonight for your party.”

“How nice of him,” I replied dryly.

“Yes, it is,” she said, her smile faltering slightly.

*Time to change the subject.*

“So what’s the plan for tonight?” I asked aloud, looking around and taking in all the decorations they had put up. “I understand strippers are a no-go, so I guess we’re on our own?”

Testing the atmosphere, I got a mix of reactions to that little joke. Kayla giggled, Regina rolled her eyes, and Katherine actually blanched. Tonight was going to be interesting.

“Well,” Regina said with a sigh, “I thought we could start the night off with a movie, like *The Sweetest Thing* or *The Notebook*? The kitchen staff just started putting together an amazing grilled chicken salad for us, and then I also set up the room next door for facials and pedicures. Fun, right? I can’t wait!”

*Oh. Hell. No.*

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to scratch all that. I have a much better idea on how we can spend this night.”

“What do you mean ‘scratch that’? What could possibly be better?” Regina complained.

I smirked. “The guards have a PlayStation in the game room downstairs. And I think it’s our turn to play.” I turned to Clive and Owen. “Hey, Wonder Twins, we’re gonna need two large pizzas, one veggie and one meat lovers, and a twelve pack of Heinekens. Think you can make it happen?”

They both smiled at me. “I think we can manage, Miss Jaden,” Clive said and immediately began ringing out my order into his Bluetooth headset.

Finally! Something was going my way.

“Let’s go!” I said to my little group behind me and headed to the basement in search of the game room while Clive and Owen followed.

“I so love you right now,” Kayla whispered to me as we walked down the stairs. She was putting me in a good mood already, but that didn’t distract me from the wincing she made with each step down the stairs. Matt had hurt her again, and I’d find out why later.

Cheers and shouting erupted from a room down the hall where the guards who were not on duty were finding another source of entertainment. I opened the door and walked right in, the girls standing behind me as the room suddenly grew quiet, all eyes on me. Ignoring them and looking at the screen of the TV, I could see they were playing *Mortal Combat*. One of my favorite video games.

“I think it’s our turn to play, boys.”

My fist struck the side of his jaw for the fifth time that night, and still, he had the nerve to pretend he was clueless. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to worry about getting blood on my shirt tonight, but it was starting to look like I was going to need a change of clothes before the night was over.

“Let me know when you’re done wasting my time. I have no problem changing my methods if you need further persuasion to give me what I want.”

I stared down at the stupid fuck my security team caught snooping around the estate earlier today. He was currently strapped to a chair, his limbs shaking from adrenaline and fear, wishing he were anywhere but here.

The little shit claimed he was one of the workers assisting in the setup of the chairs for the ceremony tomorrow, but after he was found separated from the remaining workers with a tiny camera in his pocket, he was detained immediately. I felt hellfire inside me when I looked through the

photos and saw several pictures of Jaden jogging along the property with Camaro.

His sweaty blond hair clung to his bruised bearded face while his torn jeans and fake employer's jacket were stained with blood and dirt. Scott, Dan, Dom, and Matt stood around the room, amusement on their faces as I went to work. The cement basement of the club we were in was mine, and it wasn't the first or the last time I'd be down here "working."

"I told you! I don't know anything! I'm telling the truth!" His begging barely intelligible with his jaw not working so well at the moment.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the pruning shears from the table, placing his pinky finger between the blades. Suddenly, he forgot how to move or even breathe.

"Here, let's start with something easy. How about your name? Can you handle that?" Even though his name was the last thing I cared about, I waited for a moment to see if he would finally give me some cooperation, trying not to lose my patience when he took a deep breath.

"Okay, okay," he murmured, his eyes wide with fear as he kept them on the finger he'd lose if he didn't talk. "My name. It's ... it's Jason."

Revulsion instantly hit me.

"*Jason?* I fucking hate that name." Snip went the little finger.

"Oh, my God! You son of a bitch!" *Jason* screamed, his legs kicking out while his entire body shook from the pain. Blood seeped from his hand, dripping onto the severed finger that now lay on the floor.

"Sorry; another shit bag is associated with that name. Unlucky for you, unfortunately. But, just think, if that's what I'm willing to do to you just for not liking your name, imagine what I'll do if you continue to lie to me. Get the picture?"

"Fuck you, man! I told you, I don't know shit!"

"You willing to lose another digit over that lie?" I asked casually.

Jason turned silent, his face a tight grimace as he forced deep breaths in and out, more sweat dripping down his temple. I imagined he was debating whether or not all the torture we would enjoy putting him through would be worth delaying the truth. Because he was eventually going to spill.

"I already know who hired you. So all I need you to do is tell me everything else you know, and then this will be over."

Still nothing, just breathing with his eyes focused on the floor, irritating me further.

“I could cauterize that, you know,” I said, nodding to his injured hand. “Prevent you from re-attaching it ... in the event you live through this.”

His breathing became heavier, more erratic, his remaining digits curling into fists as his lips pulled back to reveal yellow teeth.

“Fuck you. I ain’t no fucking rat!” he bellowed, officially sealing his fate.

I smiled and turned back to the table, grabbing my favorite little knife used for this exact purpose.

“Maybe not,” I replied, turning back to him, the knife twirling between my fingers. “But I’m sure as fuck gonna skin you like one.”

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“I want snipers set up here, here, and here, and the perimeter of silent sensors needs to be expanded,” I ordered, pointing at the areas of the map of the estate that Scott had spread out over the table.

Scott, Matt, Dom, and Dan stood around the table while what was left of Jason remained decomposing in the chair he was still tied to. The stupid little prick didn’t know as much as I had hoped, but he provided enough information to at least give us a better advantage.

Luckily, the only thing Carter wanted him to do was to take the photos and upload them to a fucking Dropbox account and supply any extra information he could provide.

*Dropbox. Unbelievable.*

After getting the account, Scott uploaded some of the photos, minus the ones of Jaden, and added some very misleading information to hopefully convince them to enter right where we wanted them. Assuming they took the bait, we now knew exactly where they would attempt to strike first and could easily contain it. The only problem was figuring out when.

“They’re probably gonna strike midway through the ceremony,” Dom said, pointing at the clearing where the chairs were set up. “Everyone will all be in one place and focused on the ceremony.”

I shook my head. “No, they’ll wait until everyone is too drunk, full, and distracted by the loud music to even know what’s going on. I’m betting at least an hour after dinner they strike, which means we need to intercept them first.”

“I agree,” Dan added. “They’ll want us at our most vulnerable, and there won’t be a better time.”

Scott nodded. "I'll make sure the drones are ready to go. We'll put two near the estate, and the other four can circle the entire property until we catch them."

"Did you install the upgraded sites I gave you?" Matt asked Scott. The drones were relatively new but a damn good investment in security. A few weeks ago, Matt had contacted another distributor who developed their own thermographic camera that sensed infrared radiation. It was invaluable tech now compared to before.

"Yep," Scott replied. "Not even a damn fly gets undetected by those things."

Matt laughed. "You're welcome."

"I want them alive if we can afford it," I added. "I want Mooch and Carter to watch their men die one by one until it's just them. I want those fucks sitting in their own piss by the time we get to them."

"Excellent," Dom said with a smile, cracking his knuckles. Kid was more bloodthirsty than I was sometimes.

"In the meantime, I want ten invisibles on Jaden at all times. I don't want her to know shit. I'm not having her on edge on our wedding day. She deserves at least one drama-free night, even if it's an illusion."

"You got it," Scott affirmed.

"Have the fireworks display on standby as well. I want them to go off right before we strike, regardless of the time of day. The explosions will cover the gunfire and keep everyone distracted."

Scott nodded.

"And Matt, do your best you keep your cousin under control. I know how antagonistic she gets when she drinks. Let's not have a repeat of what happened at Dan's baby shower."

"Aw, come on. Now you're really taking the fun out of things," Dan whined. "I'd pay a million dollars just to see Jaden kick Regina's ass."

"Trust me, Dan, she'd do it for free," I said with a chuckle, earning a round from everyone.

"Watch it, assholes. You know I made that promise to my uncle on his death bed," Matt shot back. "Don't make me kill you fucks."

"Yeah, well, your uncle should have realized how insufferable his daughter is and reconsidered for your sake," Dan replied.

"Ya know, she probably just needs the right man to straighten her ass out. Maybe I could take her off your hands for a little while, Matt," Dom



offered, a sly smile spreading across his face.

Matt groaned. "Don't even think about it," he warned as he pointed at Dom before turning back to me. "She'll be on her best behavior. You have my word."

"Good," I said. "Because we're going to be a little busy, and I won't be able to contain Jaden if Regina makes her snap."

"Ha, and here I thought your little princess had better self-control than that."

I glared at Matt. "Careful, friend. Jaden knows her limits, but she won't hesitate to defend herself if Regina makes the same mistake twice."

"I gave you my word. Everything will be fine." Matt's eyes darkened, that glower in his eyes directed at me, reminding me of all the shit Matt was capable of, which was why I valued him as a friend and ally. I would not go to war with him over his bitch cousin, but if it came down to it, I'd still bury the fucker if I had to.

"Good," I said, dismissing the conversation.

"All right! If that's all settled, let's head upstairs for the fights! I'm thirsty for some booze, entertainment, and pussy," Dom interrupted, clearly trying to distract from the growing tension in the room.

"Do you ever stop thinking with your dick?" Dan asked, slapping Dom's shoulder.

As Dan, Dom, and Matt headed toward the stairs, Scott pulled me back by the shoulder with a look of concern on his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Cutler thinks they have a new lead on the disappearance of Bravos and his men. They're going to investigate tomorrow night."

*About fucking time.*

We never did hear back from Bravos or anyone else on his team, so Scott sent another team to find out what the fuck happened to them and then pick up where they left off.

It didn't necessarily mean that Jaden's old boyfriend was responsible for their disappearance. They could have run into trouble at the hands of someone else or some other accident, or hell, they could have simply abandoned their assignment at the risk of getting their guts ripped out of them by me. Either way, they needed to be found, and soon.

"Let me know as soon as you hear back from them."

Scott nodded and started making some calls as we headed up the stairs to join Matt and my brothers in my private office where we could look down at the festivities currently in play. If this was going to be my last night as a single man, I should celebrate my victorious conquest.

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*“Crawl.”*

*The most pathetic whimper managed to escape my lips to accompany my heavy painful breaths. My pussy was still on fire from Darren’s violent display of “affection” while my back bore the brunt of his devotion to my training and conditioning. I had a body that rivaled diamonds, he’d told me, which meant physically ... I could withstand anything. I would withstand anything.*

*He gave me more credit than I ever wanted.*

*Rising to my hands and knees, my arms shaking with strain while my legs wobbled, I forced my body to move. Because if I didn’t move it, he would.*

*One hand in front of the other, I crawled across the carpet floor to where Darren was sitting, his knees spread wide to accommodate his favorite possession during her insufferable days in that god-forsaken basement.*

*“That’s my good girl,” he drawled, the smoothness of his voice indicating his approval.*

*It was enough to bring me some relief, knowing I’d pleased him at least.*

*When I reached him, I kneeled in front of him like I was supposed to, sitting back on my legs and forcing myself to keep from wavering while I waited for his next command. Under half hooded heavy lids, I kept my eyes lowered, hoping he wouldn’t make we wait too long. He surprised me by pulling me closer and resting my head against his thigh.*

*I wanted to cry the moment he started to pet my hair. Any source of comfort coming from him was a precious gift ... and I was a sucker for it*

every time.

*It was so classic, what he was doing, yet my mind was helpless to stop it.*

*The systematic break down of punishment and reward was slowly killing me. I could feel my mind twisting in the perverse way he wanted, catching myself in an eagerness to please him just so he wouldn't hurt me as badly – just so he would love me – and then revolting in disgust at how easily I'd given in.*

*But there were no breaks. No negotiations, no deals to be made or promises to be kept. My isolation was just as constant as my fear of displeasing him. Weeks of fighting became useless and tiresome, and soon, all I had left was my endurance. How much pain and suffering I was able to take before he was fully satisfied that I had earned my pleasure from him.*

*This went on until my objective had finally started to shift from vengeful defiance to straight survival.*

*The strong fingers stroking my hair suddenly gripped it in a harsh tug, spiking my stomach with fear.*

*“Open your mouth, sweetheart.”*

*I hated myself when I didn't even hesitate.*

Five a.m. hit me like a slap in the face. My usual wake up time wasn't until six thirty a.m., but for some reason, I was wide-awake. Brushing the hair from my face, I sat up and rubbed my eyes, instinctively taking note that Darren wasn't in the room.

I wasn't sure if he would honor the tradition of not seeing each other before the wedding, but evidently, he could survive one night without me in his bed.

*Fuck, I was getting married today.*

Turning to the alarm clock, I contemplated if it was better to toss and turn in bed for an hour and a half or just go ahead and get up to work off my anxiety.

Sid always encouraged me to sweat out my anxiety rather than just wait it out, so that's what I was going to do.

Pulling back the covers, I hopped out of bed and headed to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. Of course, the second I move, Camaro wakes from her bed and barks at me.

“Shh, dog!” I chastised. “You wanna wake up the whole damn house?”

She just yawned and then shook her head before getting up to follow me into the bathroom. After I was done, I changed into some workout gear, grabbed my favorite gloves from my bag, my headphones and iPod, and walked out the door with Camaro at my side, bypassing the two men who guarded the door at night while Clive and Owen were resting one room away.

“I’m going to hit the bag,” I said to them without turning around. Not a word from them. Typical.

I passed several guards on the way to the basement, but no one said anything to me. The most I got was a nod, but I was sure someone had alerted Clive and Owen that I was up.

Heading down to the gym, I smiled at the completely vacant area. Since I had my own training room, I wasn’t used to sharing my workout space. You’d think I’d be used to spectators by now, but it was nice to just freestyle for a little bit without scrutiny from others.

I put my hair up in a high ponytail and put my headphones on, turning my iPod to play some “Kashmir” by Led Zeppelin for some good stretching before I started on the bag. Camaro sat down with another yawn on the other side of the room and watched me stretch out for about ten minutes. I felt tight in my shoulders and hips, so I worked on those until I felt loose enough to let my hands and feet fly into the bag. “Break Stuff” by Limp Bizkit came on, and that was my cue to lay in.

For ten straight minutes, I laid into the bag, striking and kicking with moderation, not to overtire myself but just to release some anxiety. But as I worked, the remnants of last night worked their way into my brain, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the good time I actually had.

I’d never kicked so much virtual ass in my life. There had been at least six guards in that room and none of them could beat me in *Mortal Combat*, not even Clive or Owen. Katana fucking slayed them all. But even in my winning streak, I took a break to let Kayla play. Even though she lost a couple of times, you could see she was having fun. Regina wasn’t much inclined to play. She preferred to make snarky comments under her breath, but I did manage to get Katherine to play one round.

Between bites of pizza and several beers here and there, the night was fairly decent. I hadn’t had pizza or beer in what felt like years, and I shamelessly gorged myself on the privilege I was rarely afforded. Even with Regina’s vehement warnings of bloating and high-fat calorie intake, I didn’t

give one single fuck. When opportunities like that came along, you grabbed them by the fucking throat and took until there was nothing left to take – Darren’s words. Later, when the guards got sick of losing in *Mortal Combat*, they switched to *Mario Kart*, thinking that would somehow give them an advantage.

Did they not know I had little brothers? Video games were how we spent most of our winters when I lived with my parents in Michigan. We’d huddle up in the basement with hot chocolate and play for hours during those winter storms. Damn, I really fucking missed those winters with them.

Taking a breather, I stepped away from the bag and stretched until my heart rate went back down. Then I started all over again, loving the feel of my gloved fists connecting with the soft leather of the bag.

Last night had been tough not to knock them into Regina’s face, but I was proud of my self-control. I’d ignored the glares she gave Kayla anytime she ever spoke out loud, or the snide comments she’d make referencing to Kayla’s “class” or her worth. It seemed when Regina realized she wasn’t getting a reaction from me, she faded into the background. However, I did get a tiny bit of revenge when I caught her in the bathroom snorting coke on the counter.

“Hey!” She’d said with a nervous laugh, wiping her nose with her hand. “Want to try some blow?”

Regina had coke on her? The little white lines of powder on the bathroom counter confirmed it. I suddenly wondered if Darren would be bothered with Regina doing drugs on his property, no less offering it to me. I’d never had an interest in hard drugs, but I’d suddenly had an awfully hilarious idea.

“Sure!” I said with a grin and walked over to the counter. Regina had a wide, triumphant smile on her face as though she was about to catch me cheating on Darren or something. Taking a quick deep inhale, I shot my breath out over the white powdered lines and watched the powder shoot into the air all over the counter. I stepped back quickly so as not to accidentally inhale any of it.

“Oh, my God! You idiot! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Regina screeched.

I had to swallow the snort that was surfacing and gasped instead. “Oh, sorry, is that not how you do it?”

Regina's face immediately turned into a cherry. "No, you stupid little bitch! You're supposed to snort it, not *blow* on it!"

"Oh, my bad," I said with a shrug. "I had no idea. Maybe next time?"

"Get the fuck out!" she screamed, and I quickly left with a huge grin on my face.

If that was the only thing that happened at my bachelorette party, it would still have been an epic night.

Katherine had intrigued me the most. She was the most quiet and reserved person I'd ever met, but I didn't know if that was just her personality or the result of her marriage to Daniel. I'd often find her observing me from the corner of her eye with a damn good poker face. The woman was a damn statue until I got her to open up and play some *Mario Kart*. When she actually won a race, she barely even smiled. She ended up excusing herself early so she could get back to her baby daughter and relieve the nanny for the night.

I'd given her a quick hug, telling her how glad I was that she came, and that I hoped to learn a lot from her in the future on how to manage a family. She gave me a knowing nod and left the room, leaving me to finish eviscerating the guards on the TV screen.

What I wouldn't do to get fifteen minutes alone with that woman...

Stepping away from the bag again, I stretched some more, wanting my hips and shoulders to be as loose as possible. I didn't want to be stiff for any reason tonight and give away the impression to our guests how I really felt about my husband-to-be.

After stretching, I went back to the bag one last time, then grabbed the chain to hike myself up and wrap my legs around the bag. Clamping down, I released the chains and started some hanging sit-ups, throwing quick jabs at the bag when I rose.

Checking the clock on the wall, I was surprised Clive and Owen hadn't busted down the door yet to yell at me to stop fucking around and start getting ready. It was only 6:30 a.m., so I figured I would finish up in a little bit. That was until I heard a female voice call my name from across the room.

"Jaden?"

Camaro jumped up and barked before I even had a chance to finish pulling myself up. Still hanging from the bag, I turned my head to see Kayla standing near the doorway, wearing a confused look on her face.

“Hey,” I said, wondering why she was down here, especially this early in the morning.

She grimaced. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Uh, hanging sit-ups,” I replied and grabbed the chain of the bag to let myself down. “What are you doing down here?”

“I was sent to fetch you,” she said, using air quotes around fetch.

“By?”

“Regina.”

I scowled and rolled my eyes. “That bitch can go fuck herself.”

“You have no idea how much I want to say that to her,” Kayla murmured under her breath.

I grimaced. “Is she always that awful to you?”

“Worse actually,” Kayla replied. “It’s just because you’re here that she’s toned it down because Matt told her to.”

I raised my brows. “So she’s otherwise a total bitch to you in front of him?”

Kayla nodded slowly, but then pipped back up. “He doesn’t like it, though. Says she’s insulting him when she insults me. But she doesn’t care, and he can’t really control her like he does me.”

*Did she just defend him?*

“Why not?” I asked. “What makes her so special?”

She shrugged. “I guess a while ago he made some kind of promise to her dad, his uncle, that he would watch out for her. His uncle took a bullet for Matt that cost him his life, so since his uncle couldn’t be there to watch over his daughter, Matt would have to take his place. Made him promise as he died, so he has to honor it or else.”

I furrowed my brows. “Or else what?”

“Basically, his family will execute him for his failure.”

*Well, damn. Now it all made sense.*

Even Darren’s protection of Regina made sense if he wanted his best friend to remain alive. Except Matt was now officially a dumbass in my mind for making that kind of a promise. Regina stays alive, or you die? What the fuck kind of shit was that? Mafia men ... I fucking swear ...

“Well, that was a stupid promise to make,” I said with a chuckle. But a very deadly promise at that.

“I thought so too, considering how she is,” she said. “I guess he may be able to redeem himself, though, depending on how she died and if it



requires vengeance on her behalf. If he avenges her death with enough brutality, his family may call it even. They'll be the judge, I guess. Of course, she's off his hands if she marries someone else, so there is that. She'll finally be someone else's problem."

I laughed. "Imagine the war we'd start if we just went upstairs and took her out right now."

And then I froze in my tracks at what I just said out loud, suddenly realizing how fucking dangerous that was. I might have only been joking, but if the wrong person overheard a joke like that, it could mean way more heat than I needed right now.

Kayla took a step back and wrapped her arms around herself, physically retreating.

"I shouldn't really be telling you this."

*Ah, fuck.*

"Kayla, you know I wouldn't say a word. And I promise, I won't go after Regina."

At least, not now I couldn't, knowing that. What would happen to Kayla if Matt were gone? What kind of damage control would Darren have to deal with if I were the one to kill her? Would Matt really try to come after me, knowing I was Darren's wife? Fuck, the possibilities had the wheels in my head turning a million miles a minute.

Kayla tightened her arms around herself and shifted her feet from side to side. "I know you wouldn't say anything, but if Matt finds out I told you, he won't be happy with me."

I scoffed. "Just say Regina bragged about it to me as a defense or something. It sounds like something she'd do. In fact, I bet I could get her to confess it tonight if she drinks enough."

Kayla chuckled softly. "She probably would."

"Miss Jaden," Clive's voice from outside the gym caught my ears. "You're needed upstairs. Now."

*Fuck. It's time.*

I nodded. "Right. Come on, Camaro," I called to my dog and headed upstairs with Kayla, hoping like fuck Clive and Owen hadn't been listening, but knowing them and Darren, if they had been, I'd probably be answering for it later.

Three torturous hours later, I was standing in front of the closed back doors of the house, looking through the glass at the scene awaiting me outside. And I couldn't find my breath.

My hair was curled into long, loose spirals, a diamond encrusted silver rose-shaped comb held my hair to the right side of my head so my spiraled strands draped in front of my right shoulder. My nails had been perfected, and my makeup was fit for an award show. All my remaining bruises had been expertly disguised by airbrush capability to the point where they were essentially nonexistent. A diamond necklace circled my throat along with my collar, dropping to the middle of my chest while heavy chandelier diamond earrings hung from my ears. My wrists and ankles continued to adorn my usual chains of diamonds and platinum, attracting enough attention to the ink on my wrists that validated my future husband's claim to me.

Glancing at my reflection from the windows, I barely recognized myself, my breath catching in my throat as I focused on keeping my heart rate even.

The dress was a mermaid silhouette with a white and cream-colored lace bodice that hugged my curves all the way past my hips until it fanned out in sheets of white chiffon all the way to the floor. The train was obnoxiously long, and the lacy straps along my shoulders connecting to the open back formed perfectly against my skin. The sweetheart neckline gave just the right amount of cleavage that Darren would appreciate without distracting others. The design was beautiful, but it held its purpose that I was sure was carefully constructed by the man waiting for me outside.

The giant diamond engagement ring suddenly felt very heavy as I tightened my hands around my massive bouquet of white roses and lilies. My stupid tiny ass hands barely wrapped around the fucking thing, and it made me want to just chuck the stupid flowers right out the fucking window.

My dress felt tight around my ribs, tighter than I remembered ... or maybe it was just my goddamn nerves restricting my breath. I suddenly wished Camaro was here to distract me with her perfect smiling face just so I had something to laugh at before I walked out, but Darren wanted her locked up for the evening to prevent any problems.

“Miss Jaden,” Owen said behind me. “It’s time.”

I felt my heart stop.

*Jaden ... stop being a little bitch. All you have to do is walk a few steps, say a few words, and after that, you can drink as much as you want until you black the fuck out and forget the whole damn thing. This means nothing, and you know it. Just go out there, do what you do best, and make him happy.*

I shook my head and laughed. My inner conscious always had my back. That bitch was everything.

Taking a final deep breath, I slowly exhaled through my nose and gave a final nod.

“Let’s go.”

The doors opened, and the music began to play through the loud speakers, alerting the guests to rise from their seats in my honor. My white heels clacked against the concrete pavement as the long chiffon train of my dress trailed several feet behind me, where Clive and Owen walked in stride.

Sunlight encased the entire field where hundreds of chairs were set up. Hundreds of faces I didn’t recognize stared back at me – some of wonder and disbelief, others with clear disdain or anger, and some completely blank. But those faces weren’t important. The only one I needed to focus on was the one several paces ahead of me.

The second my eyes locked onto his, it took all my strength not to immediately stop in my tracks. Clad in a black tux and white shirt, hair neatly slicked back with a touch of five o’clock shadow on his hard jaw, he was the epitome of fierce masculine beauty, if such a thing existed. He stood so tall among the crowd, his intimidating figure minimized everything

around him and demanded all my focus. But it wasn't just how he looked that caused me to nearly pause; it was how he was looking at *me*, a look that made my blood run cold.

That hardened look in those dark blue eyes held that glint of possession I knew so well, but the intensity of it now had never felt this bold before. The smugness in his smile as his eyes beamed at me with such pride and utter satisfaction had me wanting to retreat back into the house. I should have been happy that he was clearly pleased with what he was seeing, but I only wanted to punch that look right off his stupid gorgeous face.

And just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, Darren stepped down from the platform he was standing on and started marching toward me, that dangerous look in his eye giving me pause. I was already halfway down the aisle when his advancement had me stopping in my tracks. Maybe we should have had a rehearsal so he would know he was NOT supposed to be doing this and to stay put until I got to the altar.

*Impatient motherfucker.*

Fear crept up my spine as Darren closed in, my shoulders unconsciously hunching in preparation from that intense look on his face.

"What are you do-" I whispered, but he cut me off with his hands grasping both sides of my face and pulled me in for the deepest fucking kiss ever.

My breath was gone as he bent my body to his, molding me to his satisfaction as he assaulted my lips with his. There was an urgency behind this kiss, something more than just passion and possession, but certainty and solidarity. Darren might never admit it to me, but this was likely one of the happiest moments in his life. I could taste it in his kiss and that gave me the little burst of pride in my chest, making my heart flutter.

I had succeeded in my goal.

Darren might never love me, at least not in the sense a normal person would, but if this was what it felt like to make him truly happy, then it didn't matter. Because if I could make him feel this way without the component of love, he was already wrapped around my finger tighter than he would ever know.

The game had finally shifted, and I was ready for new ground.

Jesus, she was a fucking goddess. I didn't even realize my feet were moving until I was already off the platform. That image of her in white,

fuck, I wanted more of it, wanted it bigger, right in my goddamn face until I could see nothing else. So I moved until she was in front of me. She was mine, and in the next few minutes, everyone here would understand just how deep my claim went.

Taking her face in my hands, I cut off her concerns and kissed her like I owned her ... because I fucking did. Her body was stiff at first, unsure of what I was doing, but it didn't take long for her to melt against me like she should. God, she tasted amazing, and I couldn't wait to get more later tonight. But until then, I was going to make her my wife. Right now.

Sweeping my hand under her legs, I lifted her to my chest and immediately started marching for the altar.

"Darren, what are you doing?" Jaden whispered under her breath, her eyes scanning the rest of the surprised and snickering faces around us.

"Getting us married."

"I see that, but I'm supposed to walk to *you*. Not the other way around."

"You were taking too long," I replied dismissively.

By the time she finished protesting, we were already at the altar, and I was setting her down on her feet.

I turned to the officiant. "Proceed."

After the longest three minutes of my life, he finally got to our vows. Caging Jaden's small hands in my own, I could focus on nothing else but making her mine and what I was going to do to that amazing body of hers later.

"Darren," the officiant addressed me, pulling me back to the present. "Do you take this woman as your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Do you promise to love her, cherish her, honor her, and protect her above all others until death do you part?"

My eyes found Jaden's beautiful hazels, burning with conviction as the officiant's words struck her. This woman was mine, and she would know it in every sense of the word for the rest of her life.

"I do," I said, my eyes never leaving hers as I slipped her wedding band onto her finger.

"And Jaden," the officiant said, now turning to her. "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in

health. Do you promise to love him, cherish him, honor him, and obey him above all others until death do you part?”

Unsurprisingly, Jaden’s lips twitched at the word “obey.” My little hellcat didn’t like bowing to anyone, but she knew her place, and now was the time to prove just how well to everyone.

I could feel the smug smile on my mouth as I waited for the words that would legally seal her to me leave her lips. There would be no other acceptable response from her, and she knew that. I watched as her breathing began to change; it was slow and heavy, as if she were about to jump right off a cliff, and wasn’t that just as true.

“I do,” she finally said, placing my silver wedding band onto my finger. Her voice held more conviction than I thought possible for her, and it made my heart burst with so much pride it fucking hurt.

“You may kiss your bride,” the officiant said as if I needed his fucking permission.

My hands immediately reached for Jaden’s face, pulling her to me with a need to possess and own, and now my mission was finally complete. My lips locked against hers while her tiny hands wrapped around my wrists, squeezing them slightly.

I could feel her urgency as she pressed herself against me, giving me all of her just as I demanded. Cheers, shouts, and whistles filled the air, and for a moment, I was content with the lack of gunfire in the background. There could have been a massacre going on around me, and I wouldn’t give one single fuck. This was the only moment that mattered.

Releasing her, I took her hand in mine while she gripped the other around her bouquet, and we faced the crowd.

Jaden was now officially my wife. I was on top of the fucking world.

After the ceremony, I took Jaden into a private office of the house to sign our marriage license. With her technically being legally dead, she didn't understand the point of it, but after telling her I'd already had her life reinstated under a different identity, she agreed. She signed the certificate with my last name as her own, and just like that, I raised her from the dead. I already had all her new IDs and passport in my travel bag ready for our honeymoon.

A hot wave of pride filled my chest as I watched Jaden sign that marriage license. Not only had I brought her back from the dead, but she also now legally belonged to me, and that left me fucking elated. My princess was now officially my queen.

We then spent another half hour taking pictures. Jaden was pleasantly cooperative for every pose, smiling seemingly without effort and being the happy bride she was supposed to be. I couldn't wait to have those photos in my hands. I'd have them plastered all over the house and my office so that every direction I looked, I could see her gorgeous, smiling face.

Sitting down for dinner with Matt and Kayla, Dan, Katherine, Regina, and Dom, the night momentarily settling down, I checked my phone to monitor the drone signals. They hadn't picked up anything yet, but of course if they had, I would have been notified immediately. I imagined in the next hour or so that would change, and it was difficult to quiet how fucking anxious I was.

If we were wrong about even the smallest element, it could prove disastrous, and I wouldn't allow one single thing to fuck up this night for Jaden. As much of a bastard as I was to her, she deserved a little peace when I could allow for it. If there was nothing but death and chaos, she'd

wither away, and if you wanted your roses to bloom, you had to give them water and sunshine. And I intended to provide that to her for the rest of my life. With all the security provisions I had in place tonight, there was no way a fucking ant could even get in and out undetected.

I would just have to wait.

Jaden was pleasant throughout the dinner. She smiled often, interacted genuinely, and even found the courage to tease me about my interference with her walk down the aisle. I kept her sitting on my lap for almost the entire time, feeding her dinner and cake until she begged me to stop because she was full. I found myself having difficulty taking my eyes off her for even a second. She was so fucking beautiful dressed as she was, it was a damn miracle I didn't bend over the table and fuck her right there in front of everyone.

Once dinner was over, I pulled Jaden onto the dance floor for our first dance. She fit perfectly against me, and even though her mobility was somewhat limited by her dress and heels, she still moved just as gracefully. I didn't care if she could barely lift her legs more than a few inches, she looked fucking gorgeous in that dress. I hoped I would have enough decency to remember not to destroy it too much when we went to bed later.

As the night progressed, I introduced Jaden to every guest that came our way, making sure they all knew exactly who she was so they would know to respect her and never fuck with her. As polite as she was to all our guests, I could see the small twitches of her facial muscles as she took mental notes of each person. She was doing more than just memorizing them – she was sizing them up for everything they were worth. And it was amusing to watch.

“Didn't think I'd ever see the day,” a voice to my right commented. I turned to find an old associate holding out his hand to me. “Congratulations to you both.”

“Holden,” I replied, gripping his palm for a handshake. “Glad you could make it.”

“Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world. The day Darren Davis finally gets hitched? Now that's got to be a very special woman,” he said, his eyes now traveling to Jaden with a smile of intrigue on his face. I resisted the urge to break his teeth.

Nathan Holden was an old friend and business associate from Vegas, who mostly worked with Dominic on the drug trade now. He used to



launder some money for me through his clubs and casino until it was no longer necessary. His recent venture was an underground fight club that he'd been begging me to invest in, and I just hadn't budged yet. Rumors told me it was doing well since it had qualities other underground fight clubs didn't have, but I would determine that for myself when I eventually visited on my own time and not a moment before.

"I'm Nathan Holden," he said to Jaden, a warm smile on his face. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"You as well," Jaden replied coolly, giving Nathan a curt little smile. I could already see her beauty charming him. The fucker couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" I asked him, clutching Jaden to my side in a tighter grip than likely necessary.

"Very much. It's a beautiful wedding. But you should have had it in Vegas," he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. *Here we go.*

"I will make my way to Vegas when I have some free time, which won't be for another month. Maybe."

Nathan chuckled. "By then, my prize girl will have even more impressive stats. I can't wait for you to see her in action."

Part of the appeal of Nathan's fight club was that it not only had female fighters, but a very particular one who put on quite a show. He called her the Alexacutioner for a reason. What was interesting was that she was among the same girls sold in Jaden's auction. I couldn't deny my intrigue, but it was the last thing on my mind at the moment.

"I look forward to it," I said with a nod. I was nearly ready to gut the pushy fucker when my watch suddenly beeped.

*Finally.*

"Excuse us, Nathan. Something extremely important requires my attention. Enjoy the rest of your night."

He started to say something, but I cut him short as I took Jaden's arm and led her away, signaling for her guards to close in. As much as it pained me to leave her on one of the most important nights of our life, I had to make sure Carter was handled, and when I did, I would make damn sure he paid for every second I was away from my new wife.

"What's going on? Is everything okay?" Jaden asked, her eyes a little wide with alarm.

“Everything is fine. I just have something to take care of. I’ll be back in a little bit,” I assured, kissing Jaden on the cheek.

“Okay,” she replied, purposely failing to hide the confusion in her voice or the glare on her face. It was our wedding night, and I was disappearing without an explanation, but she knew better than to expect one.

Turning away, I nodded to Kayla, making sure she knew now was the time for distraction, and watched as Clive and Owen moved closer to accommodate my absence. The ten other invisibles I’d assigned to Jaden were probably overkill, but I needed to feel confident she would be safe throughout the night. I couldn’t afford the distraction.

Meeting with Scott and Matt, we made our way through the crowd, nodding politely at my guests as we quickly headed back into the house. My brothers weren’t far behind as we moved into the basement where my security detail was monitoring the property with the drones.

“Where are they?” I demanded as I started to remove my jacket.

“Northern region,” Perry answered as he looked over the monitors. “They just breached the perimeter.”

“Less than a hundred yards away then,” I added, watching the monitors as they picked up the infrared heat signals.

Rolling up the sleeves of my shirt, I started to suit up with Scott, switching my tux jacket for the same carbon fiber jackets all of my guards wore. Lighter and stronger than Kevlar, it was expensive as fuck but always worth it.

“So the real party is finally here?” Dom asked enthusiastically as he entered the room with Dan following right behind him.

“Finally,” Matt confirmed.

“The squads are already moving into place,” Scott added, stepping toward the screen. “How many we lookin’ at?”

“I’m picking up fifteen different heat signals, closing in, each about one yard apart.”

“Let’s move,” I ordered, and in less than ten seconds, Scott, Dan, Dom, and myself were armed to the teeth and heading in the direction of the shitstorm about to go down. Matt stayed behind to help coordinate with us and the drones.

Bypassing the crowd of guests around the back, we quietly made our way through the trees to meet up with several of my already stationed men

waiting for orders. Crouching next to a tree, I quickly put on my infrared glasses, raised my rifle, and waited for my target to enter my sights.

“Engage when they’ve closed five yards,” I ordered through my headset. “Aim for the legs and the shoulders if you can afford it. I want some alive for later. Mooch and Carter are to remain intact.”

I had thirty of my absolute best men hiding in these trees, ready for anything and everything. They weren’t just trained well; they fucking lived for this shit, just as I did.

“Are the fireworks ready?”

Scott nodded as he crouched next to me. “They’re just waiting for the order.”

“Two yards away,” Matt said through the headset.

My heart was racing with anticipation, adrenaline coursing through my veins with an eagerness for bloodshed and carnage. I’d been waiting a long time for this, but patience was everything. Sometimes it was best to just let my enemy come to me on my turf.

“One yard,” Matt announced. Adjusting my rifle, I aimed at the first heat signal that registered, carefully following the movement until it was time to strike.

“Cue the fireworks,” I ordered.

Within seconds, the sky lit up with neon light as waves of thunder echoed through the air.

*Game on.*

“Now!”

Gunfire immediately shook the ground, the piercing sound mixing well with the beautiful chemical explosions above us. And at that moment, I felt myself come alive.

As I moved swiftly through the trees, my sights set on the scattering infrared images through my glasses, I took down several targets, carefully aiming for their arms and legs so I could have something to look forward to later. The infrared couldn’t pinpoint which heat signal was Carter or Mooch, of course, so I needed to be careful with my accuracy. The fireworks had clearly done their job, distracting the intruders and completely throwing them off guard at our immediate assault.

The whole ordeal lasted about six minutes with two casualties on our side. As we rounded up eight of the fifteen survivors, a smile cracked my face in half when I finally laid eyes on Carter’s bloody and busted face

glaring at my better militia. He was kneeling in the middle of the group, his hands resting on his head like the rest of his men as he waited for what he knew was to come. Tony Moochi knelt next to him in the same position, his black hair greasy and disheveled from the fight. They both looked like shit. With my soldiers surrounding them and their wounded eight, neither of them stood a chance in hell of escaping me this time.

“Hello, Carter, Mooch,” I addressed them, amusement practically dripping from my tone as I stepped forward and removed my glasses. “I don’t recall sending either of you an invitation, but I should still thank you for *finally* dropping by. You certainly know how to crash a wedding.”

Neither said a word at first, the scowls on their faces the only reaction I got as their chests heaved in slow, heavy breaths, their men groaning around them from their bullet wounds.

“How did you know?” Carter asked with pure hatred oozing from his voice.

I sneered. “Because I’m always one step ahead of everyone, Carter. You seriously thought you could come at me with fifteen men at my own wedding, and I wouldn’t take every single one of you out? Was it really worth it? You could have just disappeared, and it never would have come to this.”

His eyes formed into little slits as he scowled at me. “You burned my house down with my family inside. What the fuck else did I have to live for but revenge?”

I nodded at that, respectfully yet annoyingly accustomed to the acts of revenge.

I shrugged at his response, feeling zero remorse for the past. “Glad you felt the need to take down fourteen others with you. Or was that Mooch’s idea?”

Mooch scowled at me as well and spat at the ground. “Fuck you, you piece of shit.”

I chuckled and then turned to my men. “String up the survivors.”

One by one, the bleeding surviving members of Carter’s and Mooch’s little group were fastened with a thick black rope around their necks, the rope pulled over a wide branch, and held tightly by three of my men. The survivors struggled to fight, to maintain their dignity, but it was difficult to fight through the exhaustion and pain of their injuries.

“Raise him up,” I ordered.

Gripping the rope, my men pulled, hoisting the survivor up until he hung by his neck, his feet kicking madly in the air, splattering blood from his wounds everywhere while his fingers attempted to pull at his throat. But for me, it just wasn't enough to hang the son of bitch. He had contributed to interfering with my wedding and taking me away from Jaden on what was the most important day of our lives. And for that, he had to pay. They all would.

Lifting his shirt, I grabbed the hunting knife from my belt and sliced it across his belly, enjoying the muffled scream that penetrated my ears. I loved watching the reactions of people when I gutted them, their hands moving to catch their spilling intestines as if they could somehow hold them in. What a sight.

I did this to each one until only a few survivors were left, Mooch and Carter included. I moved them to the front of the group so they had a front row seat and didn't have to worry about missing any of the action. Some of the blood from their men had even managed to spray onto their faces. But as they watched their men slowly die, I could see it only enraged them further, and I fucking loved it. But I also underestimated it.

Turning my back on them to slice into another hanging survivor, a growling body slammed into me, the impact sending me to the ground. But as I fell, my arm reached around to grip the body and keep them controlled until I realized it was Mooch who'd finally found his balls. And then more chaos broke loose as the remaining survivors rushed my men, probably hoping to get shot rather than strung up and gutted.

"You motherfucker!" Mooch yelled as he attempted to headbutt me over and over and failing miserably. But struggling with him distracted me long enough that I just then noticed Carter making his way past me and running toward the reception.

Fury engulfed my body at the thought of him getting anywhere near Jaden.

"Fuck! Go after Carter!" I shouted, withdrawing my knife and plunging it into Mooch's throat, his struggles ceasing as he began to bleed out all over me. Shoving his dead weight off me, I quickly rose and tore off after Carter with Scott just a few yards ahead of me.

I swore if anything happened to my new wife, I would burn the entire world down.

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I watched Darren walk away from me on our wedding night and disappear into the growing, moving crowd. He had been working toward this day for so long, bragging of its eventual manifestation, and now he was leaving me during it? I didn't understand. He'd been so happy when he kissed me at the end of the ceremony. I could feel it in my bones. Had I upset him? Was something going on I wasn't aware of? What the fuck.

Before I could delve further into my thoughts, Kayla placed two shot glasses filled with pink liquor on the table in front of me.

"Okay, time for shots!" she said, her voice filled with surprising excitement.

I looked down at the shot glasses and then back at her face, raising my eyebrows. She hated the idea of me marrying Darren, and now she wanted to celebrate with shots?

"Shots? Are you even allowed to do these?" I asked her.

She smirked. "Only for tonight, so don't make me waste this chance. Now, drink up!" she said, holding up her little glass.

I shook my head with amusement and grabbed my glass. Tapping it against hers, I swallowed it back. There wasn't much of a burn, and it tasted delicious, which meant it was probably watered down. I wouldn't complain, though. I wasn't that much of a drinker anymore.

"What was that?" I asked, setting the glass down. "It was good."

"Pink Pussy," Kayla answered with a short giggle.

"Ooh, well, now I understand the obsession."

We both chuckled quietly to ourselves as the music continued to flow through the background. It was the first time I had a moment to sit down

and actually process the day, and it made my heartbeat faster.

*Fuck. Darren was officially my husband now.*

*Husband.* That word was so foreign to me. It didn't fit Darren like it should. It was too domestic of a word. It fit someone else who was more qualified to hold that title. Pain tore into my heart at the thought of the one person I still failed to forget no matter how hard I tried. My gut would twist with guilt every time he entered my mind, knowing it was a betrayal to Darren, but I couldn't help but wonder where Jason was, or if he was okay. Was he still watching over my mom and brothers? Would Darren tell me if he found him? Would I even want to know?

The thought had my stomach churning with anxiety, but once again, Kayla interrupted my internal turmoil.

"Come on, let's head to the bar for another shot, and then we'll hit the dance floor. You're way too stiff for a bride!"

I let Kayla pull me from my seat and usher me through the guests and toward the bar. I could feel numerous eyes on me as we made our way through the crowd, receiving several nods and smiles from the people I'd met earlier, and then watching those smiles quickly disappear as soon as they caught sight of Clive and Owen. It made me laugh inside.

When we reached the bar, Kayla ordered us each another shot, Apple Jacks, this time, and it was two seconds before they were placed in front of us. It was then that I realized Matt was also nowhere in sight.

"Where's Matt?" I asked as Kayla handed me the shot.

"Hopefully dying in a ditch somewhere," she grumbled under her breath.

I snorted and took the glass from her. We toasted and then threw the shots back, the burn of the whisky taking the edge off and giving me that liquid confidence I was so fond of.

"Are you okay?" Kayla asked me. "You're too quiet. You look worried."

I folded my lips together, wondering if I should reveal anything, but I needed a little reassurance.

"I'm just surprised Darren left is all. It's our wedding night."

Kayla gave me a regrettable look. "Did he say where he was going, or how long he would be?"

I shook my head. "No, he never does because it's none of my business anyway. But I thought today would be a little different."



Kayla grimaced at me. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be happy to be away from him for a while," she whispered quietly enough for only me to hear. Thankfully, she was still capable of some discretion when she talked shit.

"Yeah, well that was before my survival was dependent on his happiness. It's our wedding night, and he doesn't even want to spend it with me. Shit, I must have done something wrong."

Kayla waved down the bartender, ordering two shots of tequila this time, and placed them in front of me.

"Jaden, as your friend, I'm going to tell you something really important. You sound like a paranoid idiot right now. There are a lot of people here, so he's probably just conducting business and will be back shortly. Now, stop assuming the worst, take this shot, and let's go fucking dance."

Smirking at my friend, I took the shot from her. "Bitch," I replied.

After licking the salt from the glass, I downed the shot, a full-on burn tearing its way down my esophagus, and found some bitter relief after biting into my lime.

"Mrs. Davis," Clive said from behind me. Turning toward him with a scowl on my face, it deepened further when I saw he had quite the little snicker on his face. "That's enough shots for now, I think," he said.

I glared at him. "Where's Darren?" I asked bluntly.

"You know I can't answer that," he said with a slight shrug.

I turned back around to the bar. "Then I guess I'll have another shot. Actually, fuck that, I want a damn drink."

Snatching the two Jack and Cokes the bartender set down for us, Kayla and I quickly made our way to the dance floor before my two Debbie Downers could confiscate them. Moving through the crowd, I sipped my drink until we made it to the middle of the dance floor where I could hide from the prying eyes of my damn bodyguards.

Just then, a loud boom echoed over the sky, causing my heart to backfire instantly, but when the flash of neon color followed, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, fireworks!" Kayla yelled with surprise.

I turned to watch the display overhead. The fireworks took up the entire sky, the big and beautiful colors stealing all my attention while each boom echoed through my chest. The only thing unusual about it was the speed of the firing. They were constant, almost like the entire thing was just the finale.

But something else was strange about the display. It took me a full minute to catch it, but it was there, subtle but offbeat. There were other booms in the backgrounds, lighter sharper ones, ones that weren't consistent with the explosion of color.

*Gunfire.*

No longer interested in the fireworks, I grabbed Kayla's arm and made a beeline straight for Clive and Owen, who were not more than ten feet away from me.

"What the fuck is going on?" I shouted at them, my heart now racing with anxiety and adrenaline. If there was a threat at my wedding, I wanted to fucking know about it. Right now.

Clive shook his head. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with. Just enjoy the show."

I thought I was going to explode with rage.

"There's fucking gunfire going on somewhere! Do you think I'm that fucking stupid?"

"Keep your goddamn voice down!" Owen shouted at me, making me want to slap the shit out of him.

"Jaden? What's going on?" Kayla asked me, her voice suddenly timid with worry.

"That's where Darren is, isn't he?" I asked, rage coating my voice like tar. "And Matt? I haven't even seen Darren's brothers around or Scott either."

"Mrs. Davis," Clive addressed me in the most serious tone I've ever heard from him. "Everything is under control, and you need not concern yourself with matters that don't concern *you*. Just enjoy your wedding."

I scowled so hard I thought it would never leave my face.

"A wedding my so-called *husband* is missing from? This is bullshit," I growled, pointing at both of them and turning away.

Taking Kayla's hand, I moved away from the crowd and into a secluded corner near the house, the rush of adrenaline clearing my head from whatever buzz I had earlier. The fireworks continued to distract the crowd, delighted with the bright colors and completely oblivious to the background music that would be my life. Fucking sheep.

When the fireworks finally died down, my heart rate didn't follow. I listened intently for any remaining gunfire, but it seemed to have faded with

the fireworks. It wasn't two seconds later that the music picked back up, and the crowd returned to the dance floor.

I suddenly wanted another drink.

"Jaden? Is everything okay?" a soft familiar voice asked. Katherine.

I turned to her, attempting to soften my scowl. She looked so pretty dressed in a gray silver gown with her honey blond hair pinned up in curls. I didn't want to spoil the evening for her, but I wanted information that no one would give me. Darren was going to get shit from me later.

"I don't suppose you know where your husband is either, do you?" I asked her.

She shook her head softly. "Unfortunately, our position in this life is on a need-to-know basis."

"So I've gathered," I replied gloomily and looked at Kayla who shrugged her shoulders. "So you likely didn't notice the gunfire in the background of those fireworks, either, huh?"

Katherine's mouth turned into a tight line before she answered. "I notice a lot more than you think I do, Jaden."

*Well, shit.*

I suddenly felt the need to take advantage of the noise surrounding us.

"Katherine, how much do you know about me?" Suddenly, I felt bold.

She seemed to be a little taken aback by my question, but she recovered quickly enough to formulate a cryptic answer.

"I know enough to understand where you came from."

I nodded, surprised she knew anything at all, but how much was the real question.

"Then you should understand this transition is not easy for me. As much as I'm trying to accept it, I'm not a fan of being left in the dark."

She placed a delicate hand on my bare shoulder, her warmth radiating over my skin while her eyes remained soft. "Sometimes, Jaden, the dark is the safest place for us, both mentally and physically. I went through something very similar a long time ago. I know I'm more accustomed to this lifestyle than you, but my transition was still much more difficult than I imagined."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Why did you marry Daniel then?"

She was silent for a second, her eyes glancing in several directions before she finally answered. "I had just as much of a choice in my marriage

as you did. But that's a story for another time – when we are among like company."

I released a silent breath in disappointment. "What am I supposed to do here, Katherine?" I wasn't one to ask for advice, especially to those I couldn't fully trust, but something about Katherine made me feel like I was among like company.

She rubbed my arm in a comforting gesture before answering. "Adapt," she said sadly.

I nodded, my stomach twisting with discontent at the hearing of the same old broken record. Adapting was all I could ever do anymore. I couldn't change Darren any more than I could change the damn weather. The best I could do was make peace with what was and move on. Except it didn't look like it was working out so well for Katherine.

"Unfortunately, it's getting late, and I need to see to my daughter," Katherine said, "but I'm sure I'll see you again very soon." She stepped in to give me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Make the most of the good moments when you can and don't linger on the bad when avoidable. You do make a beautiful bride, Jaden. Enjoy the rest of your night."

She waved goodbye to Kayla who was still standing at my side and then disappeared as she moved toward the house, her own guards hot on her heels. I suddenly wished I could just go to bed, but I doubted I would be allowed to until Darren returned – if he returned. So I supposed it was time to get another drink.

Deciding to forget all my troubles, Kayla and I had another shot and hit the dance floor, leading the Cupid Shuffle, the Wobble, and even slow danced together in a fit of stupid giggles to "At Last" by Etta James. We were getting lots of stares then by all the other couples on the dance floor, but I didn't give a shit. Stare away, motherfuckers. I've handled worse.

We were having a nice time until Regina had to ruin everything with her presence.

"I see," she drawled, her voice filled with contempt. "Darren leaves you for a few minutes on your wedding night so you retaliate by turning into a lesbian. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to hear about this."

I cracked right the fuck up at that, laughing unabashed at how utterly fucking stupid that was. Was she for real right now?

"Oh, you think that's funny? I'm sure Darren will appreciate it. And you," she sneered, turning to Kayla. "You shouldn't even be here. I can't

believe Matt even let you out of the house!”

I resisted the urge to punch her. “Oh, fuck off, Regina. Besides, you’ve got some white stuff under your nose that you should probably take care of,” I said with a chuckle. I was coming down from my buzz now, but still relaxed enough not to care about anything this jealous bitch said. If she wanted me to beat her ass, I would do it on a day that would draw less of an audience.

I heard a quick gasp as Regina immediately rubbed the back of her hand against her nose for a good thirty seconds before her paranoia faded when she realized nothing was there. Kayla and I couldn’t stop laughing the entire time.

“Oh, ha-ha,” she replied sarcastically. “You know, I’d be a little more respectful if I were you, Jaden. I did just plan your entire wedding in only a few weeks, which wasn’t easy. You’d think you’d be a little more grateful with all the hard work I’ve done for you.”

I snorted. “The only thing I’ll be grateful for is when you leave us both the fuck alone. Now if you’ll excuse us, we were having a good time before your stupid mouth interrupted us.”

She actually gasped. “You ungrateful little bitch! After everything I’ve done for you!” And then she lifted her hand and slapped me across the face.

Even with my slight buzz, I could see it coming a mile away, but I decided to let her do it. Because the consequences would be so much better. There was a slight sting flowing through my left cheek, and it just made me smile and laugh. I was so used to the back of Darren’s hand that her slap felt like a fucking butterfly wing.

The look on her face as she watched me smile had me laughing even harder. Bitch might have planned my wedding, but I was about to plan her fucking funeral.

“Oh, you stupid bitch.” I chuckled as I stepped out of Kayla’s embrace to address Regina. Clive and Owen were looking at me from behind Regina, their faces taut with anger as they waited for my signal.

We had an agreement that even Darren approved of that they wouldn’t engage Regina unless I either gave them the go-ahead or she was actually attacking me. They knew I could handle myself against her, and if anyone was going to retaliate against her, it would be me. But this time, I wanted to show her just how little I had to do to prove to her which one of us was the top dog.

“You should know I don’t even have to lift a finger to reconcile what you just did.”

I then looked at Clive and Owen and nodded toward Regina.

“Miss Rainer,” Clive spoke, a wide smirk on his face and he stepped toward her while Owen signaled for two more guards to approach. “You have three seconds to remove yourself, or will we do it for you.”

“You wouldn’t dare touch me,” Regina sneered up at him.

“After what you just did? Wanna bet?” I retorted with a smirk.

Clive and Owen then immediately took hold of each of Regina’s arms and started to haul her away.

“Hey! Get your fucking hands off me, you bastards!” Regina screamed as she was dragged away. “You little bitch! You’ll pay for this one! Just you wait!”

*Yeah, okay.*

I smiled and waved goodbye as her shrieks drowned away into the background.

I turned back to Kayla who had the biggest grin on her face. “That was awesome, but I’m surprised you didn’t kill that awful bitch.”

“Maybe another time, when I feel like starting a war,” I replied with a wink, waving off the idea. “Right now, I’ve got better things to do, like head to the bar for another drink. I feel sober again.”

Maybe I’d punish Darren tonight by having him returning to a super wasted, out of her mind Jaden.

“Let’s rectify that then,” she replied, and we both started to make our way there.

But as we walked, shouting and gunfire erupted ahead of us, people screaming and moving out of the way to clear a path for a man running madly almost in my direction. He was covered in sweat, blood, dirt, and bruises, and was wearing some kind of military combat outfit. My observation didn’t last long as he abruptly stopped, grabbed a knife from his belt, and hurled it right at me.

At that very moment, everything seemed to slow down to a millisecond. More shouting, bodies moving even more, my name being called somewhere, yet I felt absolutely nothing.

Instinct kicked in before I had a chance to register it, my body immediately jerking to the side to dodge the incoming blade, my arm

turning in time to allow my hand to strike out and snatch the handle from midair.

It was as if the gravity around me had shifted, this singular moment focused exclusively on the fact that I now held the knife in my hand that had just been flying through the air. And now the entire world around me had stopped to witness it.

Clutching the blade in my hand, I looked back at my attacker, but I could feel a million eyes on me, gasps filling the air, my remaining guards standing only an inch away completely immobile with shock. Even my attacker was just as surprised as everyone else.

*Someone just tried to kill me at my own fucking wedding.*

*Well, that didn't take very long.*

"Holy shit, Jaden!" Kayla screamed beside me.

Fury emanating my entire body, I flipped the knife in my hand, catching the blade between my fingers and threw it back at him with as much strength and accuracy as I could muster. It pierced straight into his throat just as Clive and Owen and all the rest of the guards pulled me and Kayla away, shielding us behind them. Between their shoulders, I watched with satisfaction as my attacker fell to the ground, clutching his throat while blood spilled all over himself and the ground.

Gasps and screams filled the air, substituting the music that was no longer playing. The guests moved farther away as the guards swarmed and filled their spaces. That was when I saw Scott and Darren running from the same direction as my attacker, their faces awash with shock, worry, and rage.

I watched as Darren's eyes moved to the dead body lying on the ground while Scott turned him over and checked him. Scott's nod confirmed he was dead.

My eyes traveled along Darren's form, checking for injuries, and finding myself confused. He'd changed out of his tux and was wearing the same kind of jacket his guards wore, an assault rifle was strapped to his back, and he was covered in blood.

*What the actual fuck.*

Now that Kayla and I were officially barricaded in my bedroom, the adrenaline and drama of the night had faded away into the background and all I felt now was exhaustion. It was almost midnight, and I wanted nothing more than to be out of this goddamn dress and under my fucking bedsheets so I could finally close my eyes and let the day end. But no, I had to wait on Darren.

Six guards stood inside the room, including Clive and Owen. Two were Matt's guards, watching Kayla, who was sitting silently on the couch next to me. Her eyes were red and blotchy as she stared at the floor, her folded hands clutched so tightly her knuckles were going white.

"Kayla? Are you okay?" I asked softly as I turned to her.

Her mouth was in a tight line as if she were trying to keep from crying, her body shaking slightly.

"Hey, Kayla, look at me," I urged gently, rubbing my hands up and down her arms in a failed attempt at comfort. "Look at me, breathe, it's going to be okay. Everything is fine."

"You..." she attempted to say. "You just... You just killed someone," she whispered, her eyes wide with shock. "You didn't even blink! You just caught that knife like it was no big deal and then threw it right back at him!"

It occurred to me that I didn't exactly feel anything about what I had done. And wasn't that the point? I shouldn't feel bad about killing people in this kind of world I'd been forced into, especially those who tried to kill me.

"He tried to kill me, Kayla. I did what I had to," I replied gently.



“You threw a *knife* into his *throat*,” she murmured. “How did you do that? I’ve never seen that much blood in my life.”

I didn’t know how much I should reveal to her, but she needed to know we didn’t live in civility or democracy anymore. It was survival of the fittest, and I intended to survive for as long as I could.

“I’ve undergone a lot of training since we last saw each other, Kayla. Knives are kind of my specialty now.”

“But you almost died!” she shrieked, mascara tears now starting to stream down her pretty face. “I almost watched you die! I almost lost you!”

*Shit, wasn’t the first time I’d heard that.*

“Shhhh!” I shushed her, trying to quiet her down. “But I didn’t die. I’m fine. You gotta calm yourself down. Everything’s okay now.”

Just when she started to quiet, the door to the bedroom swung open and in walked Darren and Matt, both wearing scowls.

“Kayla,” Matt called Kayla’s name as he moved toward us. Eyes downcast, she immediately rose to his side without a sound. Rising myself, I couldn’t help but notice Matt was completely clean, still in his black suit, unmarred and kept, not even his hair was out of place. Where had he been the entire time? Fuck.

Wrapping his arm around Kayla, he nodded to Darren and led her out of the room.

Darren hadn’t even moved; his eyes stared me down with an intense scowl that had my stomach clenching and my left foot slowly moving behind me.

“Out,” he ordered, and the remaining guards cleared the room in seconds.

That intense stare remained on me, causing my heart rate to spike and my shoulders to shift in anticipation. Why was he pissed at me?

And then he moved in on me, maneuvering quickly enough to cause me to jump slightly, but my breath caught in my lungs when his hands only captured my face, holding it up and forcing me to look directly at him.

He sighed as he stared down at me, his thumbs caressing along my cheeks in a soothing manner, unconsciously revealing the regret in his eyes that dared to peek through.

“Are you all right?” he asked me gently.

Was I? I just killed someone at my own wedding in self-defense without any idea of who the person was or why they wanted me dead. I suddenly

decided that I deserved to know.

“I will be if you tell me what happened tonight.”

My words were gentle, but there was a firmness behind them I couldn't deny. Katherine said it was better to be left in the dark, but if the dark was going to eventually come to me, then I should be prepared for it. I couldn't do that if Darren decided I was on a need-to-know basis.

Darren sighed as his eyes scanned my face, but I remained passive, waiting far too patiently for him to answer until he finally did.

“His name was Benjamin Carter,” he answered. “A long-standing pain in my ass that I've been trying to track down for a few years. I knew he was planning on attacking the wedding, and I didn't want him to slip out of my fingers again, so I let him come to me. And just when he was about to slip away again, there you were, exactly in the right place at the wrong time.”

My eyes left his to consider his words, my mouth going dry at the thought. He knew the whole fucking time there was a threat, and he never said a word to me. Typical.

“Why didn't you say anything?” I asked, not giving a fuck how he would react to that.

His brows narrowed at me, a glare forming in his stare, but I stood my ground.

“Because I wanted you to enjoy yourself for once without worrying about a threat that didn't concern you.”

I scoffed and pulled myself away from his grip. “Since when has that ever been a concern of yours?” I asked, my voice becoming antagonistic. “I'm not a fucking idiot, Darren. The fireworks display was a brilliant distraction, but I still heard the gunfire. And of course, when I started to panic, no one would tell me shit, so naturally I worried even more because I had no idea what was going on or what to expect. Luckily, I'd been sobering up, otherwise, I may not have caught that knife, and things would be very different right now.”

Darren's jaw clenched as he glared at me.

“Things would also be very different if your guards had done their fucking job,” he retorted angrily.

“They were busy removing *Regina* from the reception after she slapped me across the face. Ya know? The bitch I told you was a threat to *me*.”

Darren raised a brow. “She did what?”

I forced myself not to roll my eyes or laugh at his shock. As if what she did was totally out of character. “You heard me. She slapped me across my face at my own wedding, so I had Clive and Owen remove her from the reception.”

Confusion warped Darren’s face. “Why didn’t you just handle her yourself? You know you can.”

*Wait, she slaps me, and I’m the one getting shit for it? Seriously?*

I huffed in annoyance. “A, this dress doesn’t allow for much mobility, something I already complained about. And B, because I shouldn’t fucking have to, Darren. She should never have even been there in the first place with how fucking hostile she’s been to me, but for *some reason*, you keep putting her in front of me because you’re still under the guise that she’s harmless.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Jaden,” he warned.

“Watch your instincts!” I yelled back at him. “What you did tonight was fucking stupid! I can’t believe you left me at such a disadvantage! You should have told me what was going on! I would have been more attentive! I would have been more-”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence before Darren’s hand was constricting my throat, his iron grip pulling me to him and quickly shattering my anger into fear. Fuck my stupid mouth.

My hands furiously clenched around his forearm, trying not to struggle too hard to prevent further escalation, but he was already pushing me up against the wall, trapping me between two very hard places and suffocating my resolve.

“Tread very carefully, Jaden. You may be my wife now, but don’t make the mistake in thinking that suddenly our dynamic has changed.”

The only response I could make was a vicious groan as I attempted to ignore my heart violently pounding away in my chest.

“First things first, don’t ever waste your guards’ fucking time by asking them to swat a fly when you’re perfectly capable of handling it yourself. They have bigger things to worry about, like the people who were there to actually kill you rather than just irritate you. Regina is nothing; as long as you don’t kill her, I don’t care what happens to her. Stop whining and handle your shit, Jaden. You want to be queen? Then fucking prove it.”

I couldn’t stop my jaw from dropping as absolute fury enveloped my entire body, causing me to shove against him even though it did nothing.

“I don’t even know what the fuck that’s supposed to mean anymore! Queen of what, exactly? Being left out of the loop, at home, in the dark? I don’t know what the fuck you want from me because it changes every day! I was hoping after this we could finally be something a little more stable, something better, but evidently not.”

He laughed. He actually fucking laughed at me, that sound causing me to practically snarl at him.

“Seriously? What exactly did you expect, Jaden? Some silly idea of equality? Hardly. You’re mine, defined however the fuck I want, and modified in any way I want, whenever I want. I’m not known for my predictability, sweetheart, and that’s exactly the way I like it. What makes you think I would be any different with you?”

I scoffed at him. “Then you and I will never be what you want us to be,” I grunted against his iron grip. “If you want me on your level, then you have to stop standing in my way.”

Darren’s nostrils flared at my words until a tiny crooked smile curved into the corner of his mouth. “Who said anything about wanting you on my level?”

I could only blink up at him, suddenly at a loss for words. Because just like that, every expectation I ever had for the future just got pulverized into the dust. Again. This guy was impossible to work with.

“How can you expect me to live this life if you keep redrawing a crooked line in the damn sand?” I almost shouted.

He smirked. “Adapt.”

There was that stupid fucking word again. Fuck that word.

I shoved at him again, frustrated as fuck that he didn’t budge, but I couldn’t help myself. “What the fuck do you think I’ve been doing this whole time? Twiddling my goddamn thumbs?”

Darren narrowed his eyes at me, that razor sharp focus sending shivers up my spine, but I refused to relent. Now was not the time to cower.

“If that were true, you’d have found some way to control your fucking smart mouth by now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, shut up, you like my smart mouth. Stop pretending you don’t.”

He chuckled, slightly tightening his grip on my throat. “You’re right. I do like it. Because it gives me a reason to fuck that sass right out of it.”

I had zero time to prepare for what happened next. One minute, I'm up against the wall, and the next, I'm on my knees with Darren's hand prying my jaw open. I didn't resist, knowing full well doing so would only create the challenge he would love to demolish.

Slackening my jaw and relaxing my throat, Darren didn't wait a single moment before unzipping his pants and shoving his dick past my lips. And that was just fucking fine. He could fuck the sass out of my mouth all he wanted, but I would suck the willpower right out of him. He had no idea how much power shifted when it was like this. I might be on my knees, but he was the one at my motherfucking mercy.

Creating the right amount of suction and flattening my tongue at the base of his cock, I had Darren's eyes rolling into the back of his head in seconds, his deep groans of satisfaction the only encouragement I needed. Some days, I fucking lived for that sound.

I kept the smug smile to myself as I went to work, deep throating him the way I knew he liked and swallowing him whole, eliciting all kinds of cursing under his breath. There were plenty of times when he would try to take control and face fuck me into oblivion, but when I made the right moves, it was easy to coax him into relaxing and letting me take over. He could think he was in control all he wanted, but if he wanted the best orgasm of his life, he'd shut the fuck up and sit the fuck down.

It was so amazing to watch him at this moment, the moment when he was most vulnerable. It was almost endearing. He could be shouting up a storm, making all kinds of threats and horrible promises, but once I got him like this, the storm would calm and the only thing that mattered was coming down my throat. What I could make him feel, how well I could control what he was feeling, and the power it gave me over him were intoxicating. He became putty in my hands, an absolute dangerous feeling, and it was at that moment when I almost understood why Darren got off on control. Almost.

It didn't take much longer before he was shooting down my throat, his warm cum coating my tongue and mouth, all of which I swallowed quickly, sucking him dry.

"Fuck," Darren growled as he slowly pulled his cock from my lips. "You're too fucking good at that." This time, I didn't hold back the smugness in my smile. "Which is why we're not even close to finished." And at that, Darren hauled me up from the floor, tossed me over his

shoulder, and headed for the bed. “We’re going to consummate the fuck out of this marriage, starting with that ass I’ve been patiently waiting for.”

My heart immediately dropped into my stomach.

*Fuck.*

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My back hit the bed with a thud as Darren viciously removed his tie and jacket, that dark, possessive look in his eyes sending shivers up my spine as he watched me. My heart was still beating away in my chest, my breathing shallow, and my pussy as wet as Niagara fucking Falls. This was going to be a long ass night.

Sitting up on my elbows, I watched him remove everything from his body, his cock already at full attention again as it glistened with precum at the tip. I couldn't deny that I loved how much I turned him on, how easy it was to make him feel things he couldn't control, getting off on watching his cock weep with excitement for me.

Darren liked to think he held all the power, that he was always in control, but no matter how hard he tried to hide it from me, he couldn't deny how much power I could exert over him. You couldn't obsess over someone and expect them not to understand how deeply you were affected by them. I was his disease, and he experienced symptoms of me on the hourly. I made sure of it.

"You look amazing in that dress," he said, his voice low and husky with obvious lust. "But you have about five seconds to take it off before I destroy it."

*Please fucking do. I never want to see the wretched thing again.*

I met his eyes on a dare. "Option B is fine with me."

Darren didn't waste any time. Reaching down, he placed his hands over the delicate lace bodice and ripped the fabric apart like it was paper. He tore it all the way down to my navel, completely destroying Martha's hard work. As beautiful as the dress was, it was a falsehood. This wasn't a marriage. It

was just a new public display of captivity and ownership. But if it made Darren happy, then I would oblige.

After yanking the rest of the dress off, Darren's eyes roamed up my half naked body, a ghost of a smile on his lips as he caught sight of the white lace thong that said "Bride" on the front in light blue rhinestones. His thumbs traced along the edges of the fabric, sending little shivers over my skin and making my breath hitch.

"Open your legs," he ordered, that hardened stare already moving for the apex of my thighs. A smirk almost formed at the corner of my lips when I witnessed his sigh as he came to the realization that my thong was crotchless. "We'll be ordering more of these," he declared before his mouth descended on me.

Pleasure burst over my entire body as Darren's mouth devoured my pussy, his tongue stroking every inch of me as though I was the meal he was starving for. His teeth suddenly grazed my clit, causing my back to arch and sending more of my pussy into his mouth, the fabric of the thong still rubbing against my lips adding to the sensation. I didn't even bother quieting my moans as Darren's hands traveled up my torso to grip both of my breasts, his thumbs and forefingers rubbing and pinching my nipples, sending new waves of pleasure straight to my clit. I was coming in minutes, my fingers gripping the sheets as I cried out from the orgasm that burst through every nerve ending of my body.

I hadn't even finished coming down from the high before Darren drove into me, his cock plunging deep into my aching core, enticing another gasp from my throat as my back arched to press my breasts into his bare chest.

"Oh, God," I moaned as he began to move inside me, fucking me in earnest and eliciting all the sounds I knew he loved to hear.

Taking my hands, he laced our fingers and pinned them at either side of my head, never once losing his pace. "Look at me, *wife*," he demanded, that last word touching my heart with a pinch of fear. I obliged his command, and my eyes sought his, those intense dark blues so full of violence and possessiveness, it was difficult to hold his gaze. "Tell me you're mine," he said, his voice dark and husky with lust.

"You know I'm yours," I replied deliberately on a moan.

"What am I, Jaden?" he asked, the expression on his face telling me exactly what kind of answer he wanted.



“My husband,” I answered confidently. “Which makes you mine now too.”

And at that, I pushed back, lifting my head to claim Darren’s mouth in a kiss that meant absolute fucking business. His reaction to my declaration was exactly as I predicted, as if I had just injected him with adrenaline. Kissing me with such force, he pushed me back into the pillows, his tongue plundering my mouth so exquisitely I was ready to come again at any second. His hands gripped mine even tighter, reminding me of his strength, my vulnerability, and all the horrible things those hands were capable of.

“Jesus Christ, you really are going to be the death of me, aren’t you?” he said as he pulled back, releasing my hands so he could grip my hips instead. I didn’t respond as he switched his angle and drove home until we were both coming like it was our salvation.

But I knew we were far from finished.

Flipping me onto my stomach, I’d barely come down from my second orgasm before Darren shoved my hips up, and his hand reached around to gently play with my clit. I moaned from the sensitivity of those eight thousand nerve endings, completely distracted for several seconds until I realized his cock was pressing against my ass.

“Oh, no,” I muttered under my breath, already uncertain of what was about to happen.

“Oh, yes,” Darren declared as he began to push forward inside me. “Relax, Jaden. Don’t fight me. I’ve waited very patiently for this.”

Realizing there was no escaping this, I released a heavy breath and allowed Darren to push past my sphincter and slowly enter me, inch by agonizing inch, his size nearly unbearable as my ass stretched to accommodate him. It was unlike anything I’d ever felt before, an unrelatable feeling of fullness that burned with every inch.

“Jesus, fuck,” Darren groaned as he pushed all the way inside me, holding steady so I could adjust. “Breathe, Jaden,” he reminded me.

Returning his attention back to my clit, he continued to rub slow circles around my pulsing nub until I remembered how to inhale and exhale again. As my orgasm began to bloom there, Darren started to move inside me, his long slow strokes causing me to groan while my hands were nearly tearing the sheets.

“You feel so perfect, Jaden.”

*Glad to know I’ve finally achieved perfection somewhere.*

Eventually, his long strokes began to quicken into harder thrusts, his one hand digging into my hip while the other continued to play with my clit, the two feelings mixing to create a sensation I couldn't describe. But relief was sweet when the burn of the stretch finally started to cease, and the makings of a new kind of orgasm began to build.

"Oh, my God," I whispered under my breath as Darren picked up his pace and began fucking me the way he promised so many times before. When the orgasm suddenly punched through my body, I screamed in a way I'd never heard myself scream as wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me until I was gasping for breath all over again. Seconds later, Darren stiffened as he emptied himself inside me, his deep, satisfied groan something I would later remember in my dreams.

As he gently withdrew from my ass, I hissed as the burning sensation returned while his cum slowly seeped out of me and dripped down my thighs. Pressing his lips to my lower spine, Darren left a trail of kisses up my back before nipping at my shoulder with his teeth.

"I hope you aren't tired yet because I'm not even close to finished with you."

And he wasn't kidding. For the next several hours, Darren fucked me in every which way he could, pausing only for a few breaks so we could catch our breath. I kept up with him the best I could, giving him every ounce of energy I had until I had nothing left, passing out with my head in the crook of his arm while he took me from behind.

When I eventually woke in the morning, I felt like the dead. My eyes felt puffy, my throat raw, my skin sticky with cum, and my entire body sore and spent. I was still sleeping in Darren's arms, my head resting on his incredibly defined pectoral, his chest rising up and down in a slow, even rhythm, telling me he was still asleep.

I took the opportunity to gently sit up, careful as his arm reluctantly slid off my hip and peered down at the man who now called himself my husband. Studying his face, I realized that even in a relaxed state of sleep, he still looked menacing. With the sharp angles of his face and jaw, the way his brows aligned, and the straight line of his mouth, that dark, serious expression on his face was a reminder that even in sleep, he still looked dangerous. Accompanied with all that muscle and power that covered his six-foot-five frame, he certainly was the most beautiful killing machine I'd ever seen. It almost wasn't fair.

I always felt so bold whenever I took advantage of moments like this, observing Darren so closely while he was off guard or vulnerable, like I was breaking some unspoken law or something. But even with my courage, just watching him sleep so peacefully didn't make me feel any less intimidated. This was the most vulnerable he ever was, but I also knew how light of a sleeper he happened to be, his senses so attuned to his surroundings in order to keep himself alive in the event of an attack. He was prepared for everything even when he wasn't awake.

"How much longer are you going to keep staring at me?" he murmured, his eyes still closed as he continued to breathe evenly.

*You should have known that.*

"Damn you," I whispered under my breath.

The corner of his mouth lifted into a smirk. And then he lunged.

My back hit the bed before I could blink, my hands clutching his shoulders while he ran his nose down the center of my face.

"Mmmm..." he moaned as he pressed his naked body into mine, his hands pressing against my hips. "You're all sticky, *wife*."

"Among other things," I replied as I attempted to stretch under him. "I think a shower is in order."

Snatching my outstretched arms, Darren pressed them into the mattress. "Nah, I'm thinking I should just make you stickier." Pressing his lips to mine, he kissed me deeply, his hands sliding from my arms to tangle in my hair. I broke the kiss just as his cock started to harden against my thigh.

"If you do that, we'll never leave this bed," I reminded him. I was sore enough down there as it was. I didn't think I could handle another fuck session with the last one being only a few hours ago.

"Would that really be so bad?" he replied as his lips moved down the side of my face and along my jaw.

"I want to say goodbye to Kayla before they leave."

A groan rumbled in his throat at that. "We do have a plane to catch."

That caught my attention.

"Are we going back to the estate already?" I would have thought we would have hung around this colossal property for a while longer.

"No, silly. We're going on our honeymoon."

Jolting at the surprise of that, I looked at him in confusion. "You have time to go away for a honeymoon?" He'd never even mentioned us going

away for one until now. Why did everything always have to be dropped on me last minute?

“Of course, I do,” he answered, sitting up. “We both deserve the time together.”

*Well, shit. This was going to be interesting.*

“So ... where are we going?”

“Surprise City,” he replied with a smile before kissing me on the nose. “Now, get going.”

Darren rolled off me with a smirk on his face and headed for the shower, leaving me to stretch all the kinks in my muscles out in bed. Walking on sore legs, I managed a shower with Darren, trading a quick blow job for some alone time under the hot water. The spray felt amazing on my used muscles and tired limbs, my sore body soaking in the heat like a dehydrated plant.

Once I was clean, I stepped out into the bedroom to find it empty. Darren must have gone off to see to the day before we headed out for our so-called honeymoon. A part of me was a little ticked he kept another important event to himself, always keeping me in the dark, but I knew it wasn't a battle worth fighting over.

Once I was dressed and my wet hair brushed out, I decided to head down to the patio with Camaro for some much-needed fresh air, hoping it would help wake me up. I kept my footsteps quiet so as not to disturb the entire house, but as I got toward the doors, there was another smaller feminine figure standing in front of the railing. Opening the door, Katherine turned her head slightly to acknowledge me with a small smile and a nod.

“Good morning, Jaden. You're up early,” she said gently.

“Morning,” I said, walking over to her and stopping at the railing to join her, Camaro relaxing on her hind legs next to me. That's when I noticed Katherine had Ella propped up against her chest. I wasn't all that comfortable with babies, but damn was she cute.

Turning my head away, I focused my attention to the sky as Katherine had, noticing the colors the rising sun was creating with the clouds.

“Jaden, I heard about what happened last night,” she suddenly said, her head bowed slightly before she turned to me. “I'm so glad to hear you're okay.”

I shrugged a little. “Thanks. I'm sure you're used to things like that.”

She gave me the tiniest of nods. "I wish I could tell you it gets easier. But it doesn't."

I sighed and stretched my aching shoulders. "Adapt, right?"

"That's all you can do," she replied, her attention now turning to her squirming daughter.

"How's she doing?" I asked, nodding at Ella.

Katherine smiled as she looked down at her, the kind of smile only a mother could give her child. "She's absolutely perfect. It's amazing how fast she learns."

I nodded with a smile. "Good. I'm glad to hear that."

"Do you want to hold her?"

Dread washed over me at the idea of holding a child, and I couldn't stop the panic that reflected in my eyes.

"Oh, no, that's okay. I really shouldn't."

"And why shouldn't you?" asked that dark and domineering voice that made me stiffen. Knots encased my stomach as I turned to see Darren stepping onto the patio, a stern and expectant look on his face. He was waiting for an answer.

"I don't want to drop her," I offered in excuse.

He smirked inquisitively. "You can catch a knife midair, but you can't hold a baby without dropping it?"

Yeah, coming from him, that excuse sounded pretty stupid, but with him standing here, I really didn't want to give him the image of me holding a child. I remembered how he reacted to seeing me in a white dress. This would only escalate the thing I feared the most.

"Babies are different," I stated with a shrug. "They're fragile."

Darren's eyes narrowed, that damning glare of his sending sharp regret up my spine.

"Hold *our* niece, Jaden. Now."

Our *niece*. *Goddammit*.

I shot Darren a defiant scowl, biting the inside of my cheek, but then turned to Katherine with my arms held out.

Katherine's face remained uncertain as she placed Ella in my arms and leaned her against my side. She was heavier than I expected, but then again, I hadn't held a baby since my brothers were born, which was over a decade ago.

I clutched Ella against me but not too tightly. Her pretty blue eyes peered up at me, and a wide smile spread across her face, accentuating her rosy apple cheeks. The blond peach fuzz she'd been born with had grown quite a few inches since the last time I saw her, falling near her brow. God, she was freaking cute, and it was hard not to let it affect me since I was trying to make myself look as awkward as possible.

"Look at me, Jaden," Darren demanded.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I tried not to grimace. If I looked at him while holding this little girl, it would damn me to another hell I was not ready to enter. I didn't want to give Darren this image yet because I knew once it was there, it would fester like an infection that would grow until he made it a reality. We'd only just gotten married yesterday for fuck's sakes. I wasn't ready for this yet. I needed more time.

But I could feel I was already out of time in avoiding the inevitable. So I released the breath I was holding, raised my chin, and stared him down so he could see exactly the kind of mother I would be should he force it on me – a fierce and combative one.

But I knew he didn't give a damn about my warning because the corner of his mouth was already starting to lift, that devious look of satisfaction solidifying his desires. My stomach instantly shriveled up along with all of my hope.

Holy fuck. There it was, the second-best image I'd ever seen. I'd been denying myself that image since Ella was born because I knew the moment I saw Jaden holding a baby, it would be the moment that sealed her fate, and Jaden wasn't ready for me to bring that vision to life yet.

So I waited, but now that I'd seen it, now that it was right in front of me, I wanted it more than I could suddenly stand. I wanted to see my wife holding my son, smiling back at me, and ready to give me another.

But that was not the look she was currently giving me. Instead, her eyes held the ferocity I recognized when she challenged me, warning me of her reservations for the future, but it had the opposite effect. Because all I saw when I looked at her was the fiercest mother bear the world would ever see. And I really wanted to see it.

Deep down, she knew what was to come. And very soon it would. And as though she could feel it, she quickly handed Ella back to Katherine, commenting on how cute she was, and took a step back. Her cheeks heated,

her breathing was already uneven, and I could see her throat taking heavy gulps due to her dry mouth. Oh yeah, she knew where my mind was going, and she was terrified.

“Well, I should go pack up Camaro and get her ready to go,” she said and quickly scooted past me without a second glance.

As if she was getting away that easily.

Before she could take another step past me, I clasped her arm and pulled her back toward me.

“You think you’re going to walk past your husband without giving him another good morning kiss?” I said, a sneer forming on my lips. I could never help myself from taunting her. It was too much fun.

“If only he were two feet shorter, he’d be easier to reach,” she shot back with a quick glare.

Turning my sneer into a full-on smirk, I wrapped my arm around her middle and lifted her up so she was closer to my face, her hands grasping both sides of my upper arms for better balance.

“Allow me to bring you onto my *level*,” I mocked before bringing her lips to mine. She didn’t resist, giving me everything I wanted as I slipped my tongue past her lips and took all that was mine and more. When I was finished and Jaden was fighting for air, I set her down on her feet and allowed her to leave without another word. There would be plenty to discuss on the plane ride to our first destination.

Now that Katherine and I were alone, I took the opportunity to make something very clear to her. Stepping closer to the railing of the patio, I saw Katherine’s eyes bulge only slightly, just enough to give her away as she clutched Ella and turned back around away from me.

“Did you have a nice time at the wedding last night?” I asked politely.

Katherine’s jaw clenched as she began to gently rub her daughter’s back.

“Yes, I did. It was a beautiful wedding, Darren. Congratulations.” Her voice held the slight tremor it always did when she spoke to me directly. I kept my amusement to myself.

“Thank you, it certainly was. But that beauty was only because of my bride.”

Katherine nodded, her eyes remaining on the horizon before us. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” I said, turning my eyes to her, “then I’m sure you’ll agree to making sure you watch very carefully what you say to my new wife, Katherine.”

I could see her biting the inside of her cheek as she avoided my eyes. When I left Jaden this morning, I finally had a moment to go back and watch all the security footage of last night, and Katherine’s conversation with Jaden is exactly why this discussion was needed.

Jaden was outsourcing her insecurities and concerns, and they were none of Katherine’s business, but if Jaden was trying to make it so, then I wanted that conversation contained.

“I-I’m not quite sure what you mean. I’ve only ever tried to help her.”

“So, I’ve seen,” I conceded, “but I want to make sure you understand your place in this, which is to help Jaden understand *her* place in this. Do not give her cause to hope for anything different, or it will be the last conversation you have with her. Jaden has come very far from her earlier days with me, and I will not have her backtracking now. Have I made myself clear?”

Katherine nodded again, her hand beginning to shake as she continued to rub Ella’s back. “Yes, Darren, I understand.”

“Good,” I praised, and turned my eyes back to the morning horizon. “You should go find Dan. I believe he was looking for you earlier.”

I gave Katherine the out so she could leave before she made a fool of herself. I still didn’t understand why Daniel enjoyed the meek little blonde. He’d been fascinated by her the moment he laid eyes on her, taking that potential burden right out of my hands. He did always prefer the easy ones, never going for a challenge. It was a wonder we were related sometimes. But what difference did it make to me? It wasn’t my dick she had to satisfy.

Heavy footsteps behind me alerted me to Matt’s approach as he joined me on the patio.

“Heading out?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, Kayla is already in the car. When are you gonna be back?”

I shrugged, not really having an answer. I assumed the honeymoon would be a week or two, depending on how things went, but I didn’t want a set schedule. I preferred to remain unpredictable.

“No more than two weeks, but we’ll see. Are you not letting Kayla say goodbye to Jaden before you go?”



Matt looked like I just told him I was leaving the business. “No, why the fuck would I do that?”

Typical Matt, only thinking with his dick. Jaden was lucky I thought about her wants and desires as often as I did.

“It’s a good bargaining chip to have. Small gestures go a long way with them. Trust me.”

“I’ll think about it,” he replied. “So, are you happy with the results of last night? Everyone watched your bride dodge a blade and return it to Carter’s throat. That’s a pretty nice way to set up a warning for everyone right there, huh?”

I groaned, hating the fact that Jaden was put in that position in the first place. “Yes, the silver lining, I suppose. But you know there’s no guarantee the warning will be received that way. Everyone knows what I’m capable of, yet they still risk having me as an enemy.”

Matt nodded. “That’s true. She could still be worth the risk to some. But I’m willing to bet she makes them pay for it long before you can.”

*She sure as fuck had better.*

But while I had Matt alone, now was a perfect time to address a problematic issue I discovered this morning that could not be ignored.

“Speaking of something *not* worth the risk, I received a security notification today that one of your reps visited the *Lobos* last night.”

Matt raised a brow before squaring his shoulders. “And?”

I took a step toward him. “*And* it looked like one of your guys was trying to sell them the extra ammunition they’ve been up my ass about.”

“So? What’s the big deal? We share dozens of clients.”

“The big deal is that this little militia is incredibly stupid and volatile and I don’t want to give them the ability to fuck everything up because they want to start shit with the neighboring towns and go on turf wars. Do not sell them anything. They have enough to protect the crop. They don’t need anymore.” The warning in my voice couldn’t be more clear. Matt was a close friend, but he needed to understand the seriousness of this.

He stared me down for only a second, his jaw clenching just slightly before he finally conceded. “Fine, fine,” he said, his tone lighthearted as he raised his palms in surrender, an innocent smile working its way across his mouth. “You win, as always.”

I frowned at him just as my phone started to ring in my pocket, taking me away from the conversation when I saw it was Scott.

“I gotta take this. I’ll see you when we get back,” I said to Matt and answered the call.

“Enjoy the honeymoon,” I heard Matt say as he turned back toward the door.

“What?” I spoke into the phone.

“You’re never gonna believe this,” Scott said from the other line.

I groaned aloud. There was a 50/50 chance I was about to be seriously pissed off.

“What?” I practically growled.

“Cutler found the missing team, or what was left of them.”

*Fuck.*

“The fuck happened to them? Where were they found?” I asked, my voice coming out harsher than I meant.

“Dead, half-ass buried in the fucking woods just outside of Stuttgart. And they weren’t just shot in the head dead. I mean, they were worked over first.”

A wave of rage and mild surprise took over. “Worked over how?”

“I’ll send you the photo the team sent me.”

A text came through, and I looked down to see a photo of three burnt to shit bodies covered in grime and dirt lying side by side on what looked like a dirt road. Their faces and upper torso were so badly burnt, the only way to identify them was by the watches or tattoos on their arms and legs. But as I looked over each one, it was undeniable that someone had tortured them beforehand because several of their broken bones protruded from their skin.

Most of their fingers were missing as were chunks of their hands, as if they’d been cut up bit by bit. Probably burned the bodies afterward to prevent identification.

Immediate fury flooded my chest at the thought of someone having the balls to torture my guys for the only reason I could imagine they would: information. Someone in fucking Germany was trying to get to me, but who the fuck would dare?

“No calling card?” I asked, wondering if this was a deliberate attack against me, or if they just happened to get stupid and fuck with the wrong group of people. Last I checked, I didn’t have any enemies in Germany that I knew of.

“No, and I don’t think we’ll get one. I’ve only got one possible conclusion.”

I almost started to laugh at what I knew he was thinking. No fucking way could Jaden's ex pull that shit off, especially all by himself. Bravos and his men had trained with me personally for years and were damn good at what they did, which was why I chose them to go. There was no way that fuck could take on all three of them. Not unless he had help. There had to be another explanation. A *reasonable* explanation.

"You understand how fucking ridiculous that sounds," I stated.

"Does it, though? Not to talk the guy up, but he isn't exactly new at this. He's been able to stay hidden with a woman and two teenage boys for this long as it is. He's actually a pretty skilled fighter and a fucking engineer in ballistics. Those are the worst combinations ever."

I could feel my hand beginning to crush my phone as I fought to contain my composure.

"You think any of that shit matters to me? We've taken down entire militias that had more skill than that. He is one fucking guy with zero resources, and I have an army in my back pocket. There is no reason he should even still be alive at this point."

Scott tried to quiet his sigh from his end of the phone, but I heard it.

"All right, I'll have Cutler do more digging to see if anyone has problems with you over there and figure out where Bravos left off to find him."

It was a start, but I knew I couldn't leave that stupid stone untouched. Everything had to be considered if I were to remain as efficient as I was.

"If it was him... then he had to have help. There's no way he could have taken on all three at once. And if that's the case, there's another contact out there to find. Double our efforts and get another team out there ASAP. I want that piece of shit found alive and brought to me."

"No shit," Scott replied, and we both hung up.

Putting my phone in my pocket, I couldn't stop my hands from curling into fists. I wanted to kill that fucker more than anyone ever before.

I turned around to see Jaden hugging Kayla goodbye from the foyer as Matt stood by, waiting. A new rise of emotions took over as I watched the affection on my wife's face as she placed her arms around Kayla, embracing her tightly as if she may never see her again. It was a very real possibility. I could forbid Jaden from ever laying eyes on Kayla again, and she wouldn't be able to do shit about it. And she knew that, which made her gratefulness so much more satisfying.

She had no idea how easy it was to manipulate the world around her. I could make it easy and beautiful or brutal and bloody, and she would have to accept it. The level of control I had over her and her life was fucking intoxicating, and no fucking prick of an ex of hers was going to steal that away from me now.

He had no fucking clue who he was taking on, and I looked forward to crushing him just like everyone else who came my way.

The urge to fuck my wife suddenly became all my rage; the need to own and possess her overwhelmed me all over again as if last night hadn't been nearly enough. She was my everything now, and I didn't care how many bodies I had to mutilate, corrupt, or bury in order to keep it that way. The world would burn before I ever let her walk away from me.

Pocketing my phone, I marched over toward Jaden just as Matt and Kayla walked out the front door. The uncertain shock on her face as I moved closer had a wicked smile forming on my face. I loved that look of hers. The fear, the vulnerability, the slight flinch she always made when she wasn't expecting something. Fuck, it turned me on.

"What are you—"

I cut her words off as my arm wrapped around her middle and hauled her body to me as I walked back toward our bedroom.

"Darren, what the hell!" she shrieked, her body squirming for ground. But I wasn't having any of it.

Without missing a step, I shifted her body over my shoulder, ignoring her grunts and objections, and headed up the short steps toward our bedroom. I quickly texted the pilot we would be at least an hour late, knowing full well it wouldn't matter. They would wait all goddamn day if I told them to without complaint. There were other important matters to tend to – like fucking my wife into oblivion. Again.

He was pissed about something. I didn't know what it was or why he was taking it out on me, but it was really starting to worry me. My pussy was still in shambles after last night, and then he randomly chooses to fuck me all over again just a few hours ago as if I weren't raw and sore enough. Which, in turn, pissed me off too.

What the fuck had I done now? He was usually pretty quick to tell me if I fucked up, but this time felt different. I wanted to know so I could do something about it, but he likely wouldn't tell me anyway. How the fuck was I supposed to be the "Queen" of a criminal empire if I didn't know shit about what was going on? They say ignorance is bliss, but in my case, ignorance could get you killed...unless you were Darren apparently.

I was currently sitting on his private plane, looking out the little window at the ocean below, wondering where in the fuck we were going. Again. Just *once*, I'd like to know where we were going *before* we left. But no, Darren insists on keeping everything a fucking surprise. As if I didn't have enough of those horror stories. The only thing I did get to know was how long the flight would be. Twelve. Fucking. Hours.

*Why? Why? Why? Fucking why?????*

We already had to make a quick stop in Maine to fuel up the jet, so we were already halfway there, but what the actual fuck was twelve hours away that we absolutely *had* to honeymoon at? It sure as fuck had better not be Russia. I'd be the most pissed off newlywed in history. No fucking way did I want to spend my honeymoon freezing my ass off all day. No thanks. I would have been totally fine with staying in California or even Arkansas,

for fuck's sake. But no, Darren decided where we went, when we went, and for how long.

You'd think I'd be over it by now. You'd think I'd have stopped caring and just gone with the flow, happy to be where he wants me and however he wants me. But I somehow got it in my head that being married to Darren would allow me greater privilege, or at least the privilege of the knowledge of my destinations, but apparently, I was an idiot for thinking that. I was always an idiot when hoping for change.

Looking down at my new wedding band that rested snugly against my engagement ring, there was once again no denying the resemblance of the ring to the cuffs that still adorned my wrists, ankles, and throat. I had briefly hoped that because we were married now I would no longer have to wear them since I thought they were just a symbol of Darren's ownership of me. Did that mean I was no longer his slave, or was I just now his slave-wife?

He told me I could be a queen, but he had no fucking idea how difficult it was to step into new territory when you'd been conditioned for over a year to just do what you're told and anticipate his needs. I didn't know where the line was anymore, and the memories lingering in the darkness of my mind warned me against finding out. Better to just play it safe than risk certain self-destruction.

But at the same time, I also wanted to push. The rebel in me that I was certain Darren had brutally murdered long ago was suddenly resurfacing at the idea of my possible evolution. I wasn't sure if I could stop it because the idea of stomping it out felt like a wasted opportunity I'd suddenly been given. I wanted to see what mountain I could climb next, just to see how far I could climb. I'd already conquered the little one below me. I wanted to see what else I could do and what I could become.

Everyone at the wedding saw what I was capable of. They saw that I wasn't some meek little sex toy Darren just wanted to play with. I was something more, something that demanded respect and recognition, and I'll be damned if I didn't get that.

Darren was brooding over his laptop next to me, an ever-present frown on his face, while Camaro sat at my feet. I gave up trying to focus on the book I was reading, human anatomy no longer holding my attention, and yawned from boredom and annoyance. I stood and stretched, my spine cracking as I twisted while a breath of relief escaped my lungs.

“Jaden, sit down. We’ll be landing soon,” Darren said, his eyes remaining on his laptop.

“Really? It’s been that long already?” I asked, surprised. When did that happen?

He nodded. “You slept for quite a while after we left Maine.”

“When?” I only remembered nodding off for a couple of hours. Not six.

“Shortly after your lunch.”

And then it suddenly dawned on me.

“Did ... did you drug me ... *again*?”

Darren gave me a knowing smirk with a glint of challenge in his eyes.

Rage exploded in my chest. I fucking *hated* when he did that.

“All right, that’s it. I’m never drinking or eating anything on a flight with you ever again, you shady bastard.”

Darren shrugged, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “That’s fine. I have other methods.”

That just pissed me off more.

“Why do you insist on doing that all the time?” I asked, my voice not even trying to hide my irritation.

He shrugged again. “It’s just easier that way. Plus, you’re just so damn cute when you’re quiet and sleeping.” He gave me another smug grin before he went back to his work.

*Fuck you* was on the tip of my tongue, but he was expecting that so he could paint my ass red, so I was going to deny him that. I decided just to keep up with his banter.

“Oh, that’s so funny. So are you!” I replied sarcastically.

“Lucky us, huh?” he said before the flight attendant came out to tell us to buckle up since we would be landing soon.

I pulled Camaro closer to me before buckling myself in and held on to her so she would sit still during the landing.

Fifteen minutes later, we were finally on the ground and walking out onto the tarmac to the waiting black SUVs. The sun was out, and it was warm, a light breeze brushing against my skirt and causing it to tickle my knees. I could feel the humidity in the air, but it only reminded me of the warm rainy days back in Michigan. At least it clearly wasn’t Russia.

After being cleared by the customs agents – noticeably faster than I would have thought possible – we left the plane behind and set out on the road. Sitting in the back seat of the car, I watched the scene outside, looking

for more clues to give away our location. I could see Darren watching me from the corner of his eye. He knew what I was doing, and it only gave him pleasure to watch me attempt to figure out the shit he already knew as if it was some kind of game to him.

I held up my hand and counted off my clues on my fingers. “Okay, palm trees, heat, sun, humidity, twelve hours away, direction from Maine, older looking buildings ...” I started looking for signs along the road to give away the language of the country. “Spanish!” I shouted a little too excitedly. “Are we in Spain?”

A smile cracked across Darren’s face. “Very good. Think you can guess where in Spain?”

I shrugged. I was not that well versed in the geography of Spain. “I’m guessing somewhere along the coast?”

“Close enough. We’ll be staying in Valencia for a few days.”

I suddenly wondered what the word “staying” meant to him. Did that mean that I would stay locked up in the hotel room while he conducted business with the locals? Or did it mean we might actually experience Valencia together? What would that even be like?

The last time we tried anything like this was during our stay in Alaska when we enjoyed downtown Anchorage. That was until I had a slight panic attack at the restaurant after realizing I was out in public and needed to not fuck up for the sake of my family. Would now be different? It felt different. After going with Darren’s flow for so long, it became second nature to just follow his lead and do what he expected of me. This wasn’t much different from that. Was it?

“Darren? What exactly will we be doing in Valencia?” I asked tentatively, hanging on to hope. Another stupid thing I was suddenly doing.

“Valencia is known for its City of Arts and Sciences, which is an area made up of futuristic architecture, museums, planetariums, and aquariums. I thought you might like to see it all.”

For a small moment, my heart fluttered. Most of my experiences with Darren involved cruelty, violence, sex, blood, and pain. But the moment he showed a side where he generally cared about me, when he thought of me and took interest in my desires, it temporarily shattered the ice surrounding my heart.

“I would love that,” I replied softly.



Darren gave me a warm smile, the kind that was only reserved for special moments like now, rare moments when it pleased him to see me happy. If he kept his word, then tomorrow he would have his fill of my gratitude.

“I thought so,” he said, his tone playful and light. “It’s a little after six o’clock here, so we’ll get some dinner and then head to the hotel room for the night. The balcony has a great view of the sunset that you won’t want to miss.”

*Whiplash.*

I tried to blink away my surprise and confusion, not wanting to disrupt whatever magic spell was happening here. No need to question it or debate it. I could appreciate Darren’s generosity without the need to point out the oddness of it.

“Perfect,” I replied.

The ride to the hotel gave me a moment to reflect on a new agenda. If this honeymoon would continue in this pattern, then I had quite an opportunity at my hands. If we were going to be doing things that were genuinely considered fun, visiting attractions together, and enjoying our time as newlyweds, then there was a chance I could show Darren a different side of life. One that didn’t involve blood, and violence, and pain. I could show him warmth, smiles, and hell, maybe even love. I needed to make my reactions to him and what he was doing infectious enough so he would want more. It was time to twist his idea of life.

It was time to bring him down to my world.

Valencia is absolutely amazing. The architecture was all I could think about as we walked through the streets to our first destination. Combined with the beauty of the enormous cathedrals, the historic buildings, restaurants, and monuments, I was in awe of the place.

After the small tease I got of the city from dinner and the sunset show off the balcony of our hotel room, Darren and I spent the entire next day acting like honeymooning tourists. Which was the weirdest thing to participate in. The culture of the city was infectious, and with Darren's suddenly easygoing demeanor, I found it much easier to let go of my usual restraints and focus on genuinely enjoying myself.

It didn't come as a huge surprise that Darren could speak Spanish fluently. Turns out he could also speak French, Italian, and a little bit of Gaelic. Even though it was one more thing I had to rely on Darren for, I had to admit it made things a lot easier when trying to communicate with people. They seemed to respond well to him, not taking him for some asshole American tourist, which meant they responded well to me too.

Watching Darren act like somewhat of a normal human being instead of a brooding sadistic crime lord was refreshing to see, another side of him I didn't think existed. For once, it was just us. No Scott, no Clive and Owen, no entourage of bodyguards even though I knew they were still there following us in regular clothes so they could blend in without me noticing. Not even Camaro was invited to this party.

I found my growing excitement to see and do things in a foreign country difficult to contain, and the more we saw, the worse it got. It didn't even matter to me who I was with as long as I was able to have some fun for once, which Darren obliged over and over again. He appeared almost eager

to witness my reactions to the new world around us. It seemed he was genuinely interested in watching me enjoy myself candidly, and fuck did I let him have it. If he was willing to loosen the reins, then I intended to reward him for it.

I smiled like a lunatic, rushing in every which way, pulling *him* to keep up with *me* so I could see as much as I possibly could before the rug was pulled out from under me and I was shoved back into my cage again. I was living, actually fucking living for once, and I was going to show Darren how much I loved it.

We went to the Mercado Central or the Central Market and shopped for food and snacks we would eat later for an early lunch at the Jardin del Turia, a large park people frequented. The market was so different to grocery shopping back home. There were so many shops, so much hustle and bustle that it actually put Darren on edge a little bit. Too many people meant too many security issues, so I understood, but I still wanted him to relax. So, I held his hand tightly, trying to get him to focus on me and the purpose of this trip so he would forget about his own world for just a moment.

And eventually he did at the City of Arts and Sciences when he saw how embarrassingly excited I was. Suddenly, I was eight years old again running around the halls like I was at the Detroit Science Center, except this time, the museum was twenty times bigger.

Darren wasn't much inclined to play around as much as he was to just watch me play around. Even with kids running all over the place, their parents trying to keep after them, he still managed to enjoy himself. He indulged me at the aquarium, smiling as he watched my face light up as I observed all the amazing fish, sea turtles, dolphins, and even sharks. If he weren't pulling me along through the place, I would have gotten lost in it all and probably never left.

By the time we finished with the aquarium, I was so exhausted I could barely keep my eyes open. I wanted to stay to check out the rest of the city, but Darren wasn't having it. He assured me I would see plenty more as we walked back to the car, which I did, admiring all the futuristic structures and their fantastically technical designs before falling asleep during the ride back to the hotel room. I napped for about an hour before Darren woke me up for dinner.

"Did my wife enjoy her day?" he asked me from across the table.

I was watching the sun lower itself into the Balearic Sea, setting off a chain reaction of warm colors all across the sky and water. I had just finished my dinner, actually eating everything on my plate for once and admiring the scenery when Darren addressed me.

I turned back to him and smiled, ignoring the twinge in my stomach over my new title. “Yes, she did. Almost too much, I think.”

“Not possible,” he replied. “I can’t remember the last time I had a day like today.”

I smirked at him. “Aw, did you actually have fun today?” I teased.

“Who says I don’t have fun on a regular basis? Fun is just perspective.”

“Normal people fun,” I corrected.

“Oh, so now I’m not normal?”

“This has already been established,” I replied, my tone still playful. “No need to debate it further.”

“What was your favorite part of the day?” he dejected, his eyes scouring over my face with sincere inquiry. He almost looked ten years younger when he looked at me like that.

What was my favorite part of the day? Feeling like a normal person rather than a prisoner. Getting to breathe without chains across my chest. Experiencing fun instead of fear.

“Getting to be worry free for a day,” I replied with a genuine smile. “But the aquarium is a close second. How about you?”

“Getting to witness you laugh and smile as much as you did. I don’t think I’ve ever experienced it that much in one day.”

I kept my poker face in play. I hated when he said things like that. He knew damn well why I didn’t smile or laugh as often as I did, yet he acted like it was such a big deal when I finally did. As if I were selfishly keeping them from him for no reason.

“You did a good job of making them happen today. You should try it more often,” I encouraged, holding my hand over my mouth as I fought a yawn.

“That’s the plan. And I intend to lose count again like I did earlier. Now, come on, let’s head back,” he said and stood, helping me up from my chair as he did.

“Ya know, it could be like this all the time. Where you find yourself losing track?”

Darren smirked as we walked toward the exit of the restaurant, leading me out with his hand at the small of my back. “Don’t be silly, Jaden,” he said, that mischievous, evil glow in his eye. “I still enjoy making you scream way too much.”

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For the next two days, Darren and I explored almost every inch of Valencia together. We visited the cathedrals, the town squares, experienced as much local food and drink as we could, watched the shows, and enjoyed the hell out of Spain. I never thought I would enjoy this country as much as I did, but I absolutely loved it here.

And it occurred to me that Darren did too. It was undeniable how different his demeanor was when it was like this – when the only thing he had to focus on was me. He was calmer, less antagonistic, and even playful at times. It was easy to see him enjoy himself, his smiles effortless and banter almost natural, and I actually found myself wishing this side of him would last. But deep in the pit of my stomach was the doubt that this was all an illusion; that as soon as we returned to his estate, the spell would break, and he'd turn back into the person I hated.

I wasn't ready to leave this behind just yet.

"How long are we staying here?" I asked.

With the weather being absolutely perfect today, I begged Darren for a beach day, which he obliged happily. We were currently lying out on comfy beach chairs, myself under a tall umbrella with Camaro at my feet while Darren preferred to bathe in the sun, as if he wasn't already tan enough. My time in direct sunlight was limited since the last time I got burned back at the estate. I didn't mind since I preferred the shade anyway, but battling the heat with this damn bathing suit cover that Darren insisted I wear over my bikini was a little ridiculous. The bastard got to walk around with no shirt on, showing off his obnoxiously impressive physique while I had to hide mine.

It was total bullshit.

“We’ll be leaving tonight actually,” he replied as he read something off his phone.

“What? Tonight? Already?”

Darren chuckled as he lounged in the beach chair next to me, his bronzed skin catching my attention in the sunlight. “Yes, if you want to make it to the rest of the destinations.”

“The rest? There are more? How many more?” I asked, suddenly feeling like a five-year-old with too many questions. But that’s what he gets for keeping me in the dark all the time!

“You know I won’t tell you that.”

“I think you should.”

“I think you should sit back and enjoy the ride,” he insisted casually.

*Well, now where was the fun in that?*

Feeling bold, I stirred from my comfy cushy lounge chair and prowled over to his, gently straddling his hips, not at all discouraged as he continued reading from his phone under the guise of his dark aviator sunglasses. However, I wasn’t sure if he even noticed how his free hand immediately moved to rest on my hip, the warmth of his skin already rushing through my body. He was so unbelievably solid under me, every muscle ripped and defined to be a tool of destruction and at times, to my dismay, total seduction.

Moving in slowly, I nipped his exposed neck with my teeth to get his attention.

“Are you on your honeymoon or on business?” I whispered into his ear.

“A little of both actually.”

I jolted back. “What?”

“No rest for the wicked, sweetheart,” he answered.

*Well, ain’t that some shit.*

“Well fine, I guess I’ll just go play with Camaro then since you’re too busy to spend time with your wife on your honeymoon.”

I moved to get off him, but he held me steady. “Hey, none of that shit,” he scolded, those eyes lighting up in warning. “You know I’m a busy man.”

“You only get one honeymoon, Darren.”

“I’ll have as many honeymoons as I fucking want,” he countered. “And I can make ours last as long as I want too.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had a point.

“Fine, but I’m still taking Camaro to the water. I can’t lay here anymore, and she looks too warm.”

I moved to get off him, but his grip on my hips tightened, keeping me in place.

“You’ll lay here for as long as I tell you to, *wife*.”

I met his scowl with my own, refusing to back down from that menacing glare of his as those strong fingers dug into my skin. I didn’t know why he just now suddenly became combative, but his mood shifts were frequent and often unpredictable, and I needed to move with them or manipulate to counteract them. Deciding to avoid conflict, I moved the standoff into a more playful direction and began to gently grate my nails against his forearms.

“Hey,” I said in a soothing manner. “You know I won’t be very far. You’ll still be able to see me.”

He groaned, unconvinced. I moved in slowly, taking his earlobe between my teeth and tugging gently while my nails moved to his torso, grazing against every hard ridge of his abdomen. His chest expanded with each heavy breath he took, and I knew my tactic was working just as it had so many times before. Sometimes he just needed a little distraction to make him forget what he was originally pissed about.

“It’ll be fine, and you can concentrate on what you really need to work on. I know that’s what you want to do right now.”

I could feel him hardening under me already, his urge to fuck me quickly becoming the only thing his body would want. But he would have to override it if he wanted to avoid other people seeing.

“Fine. Now get off me before I fuck you into oblivion in front of everyone.”

*Score.*

I quickly moved off him, a smirk hiding in the corner of my mouth as I grabbed the Frisbee from the beach bag we brought and whistled for Camaro to follow me toward the water. This beach was huge. Malvarrosa Beach was apparently made up of three separate beaches, making it the least crowded beach I’d ever been to. Crowded beaches were the worst, so it was nice that this vast amount of sand could be so accommodating to so many people.

The water actually reminded me of some of the beaches on Lake Huron. Even though the waves were a little bigger, the color of the water was



similar and just as beautiful.

Tossing the Frisbee high into the air, Camaro chased after it and caught it nearly every time. I loved to challenge her agility whenever I could, and she seemed like she was always up for it. That was until she wanted to play tug-of-war.

Grabbing the Frisbee from her mouth, Camaro refused to let it go, instead shaking her head back and forth as I kept my grip.

“Camaro, let it go,” I ordered, but she ignored me, like she often liked to. The whistles were her primary commands since we didn’t want anyone knowing what commands we were giving her, so the verbal commands could be ignored if they didn’t hold enough of the authoritative tone needed behind it.

So instead of getting mad that she wasn’t listening, I decided to play her game and tug against her, but goddamn she was strong. She pulled me all the way to the damn shore, the water hitting my feet as I tried to provide her with some semblance of a challenge. But with my dog dragging my heels through the sand, it wasn’t much of a good grip to stand firm on.

It wasn’t until I yanked back as hard as I could that she suddenly jerked me completely to the side, causing me to lose my balance, and toppled over her right into the water. I laughed as the waves washed over me, the water chilling my skin in a refreshing way as Camaro jumped up and down, the victor of our game.

“All right. Good job, big girl.” I chuckled, watching her splash through the water.

Looking up from my seated position in the water, I scanned the area for Darren, my stomach dropping as I found him standing a few feet away from our chairs, his hands whipping through the air and a very clear scowl on his face as he spoke on the phone. He clearly wasn’t having a very good conversation, which meant I needed to tread carefully when I returned.

*Fuck.*

“What do you mean, ‘there’s no one else’?” I spoke harshly into the phone.

“I mean, there’s no one in Germany looking to start shit with you. Cutler interrogated dozens of people and not a one had anything against you or heard of anyone having a problem whatsoever,” Scott argued.

“How do you know they aren’t lying?”

“Because they know it’s not in their best interests to lie or to have you as an enemy. They even offered to keep their eyes out for you as a favor.”

My rage still remained unsettled.

“Fuck favors. If it is that piece of shit, and all of underground Germany knows to look for him, then put a bounty out for him. I’d rather immediately reward them for their efforts now than owe them in the future. \$20 million. *Alive*. Ten if they bring me Jaden’s family. Make it happen,” I ordered and hung up.

This fucking issue had been nagging at me for too long, and I was done fucking around. I wanted this handled. Now. Jaden might not forgive me for killing Jason, but at least she’d be reunited with her family. And I will take care of them, provided she maintained her role as she should. And she will be as goddamn grateful for it as she should be, especially after being told she would never see them again.

I turned around to find Jaden sitting in the water by the shore, the waves rolling around her while Camaro jumped up and down beside her, splashing water in her face. With her hair up in a messy knot on top of her head, the fresh dusting of freckles over her face and arms, the wet bathing suit cover clinging to her tiny form, and the genuine smile on her face as she laughed at Camaro, she was the cutest fucking thing I’d ever seen.

It was comical to think this smiling, innocent looking little redhead had only just a few days ago caught a knife midair and then hurled it into another man’s throat.

And now she was my wife.

It was only as I watched the scene before me that I noticed my fury begin to subside. Just watching her alone was enough to bring me peace, knowing that she was there, safe and abso-fucking-lutely mine in every sense of the word had me breathing a sigh of relief, a sense of calm I very rarely got to experience.

This whole fucking trip was something I rarely got to experience, but it was much more addicting than I imagined it would be. In the past two days, Jaden had unequivocally come alive. I’d never seen her so genuine and carefree. It was so fucking adorable I didn’t even realize how much it had affected me until I recognized I was laughing and smiling like a fool in turn.

For a small moment, I found myself wanting to experience life through her eyes, see things the way she saw them, live them the way she lived them. I was willing to make it last a lot longer than it should before I had to

rip it all out from under her when we were eventually in Italy. My dick was already growing hard just thinking about the fire that would erupt from Jaden once she realized what was in store. And I looked forward to the fight.

As much as she might secretly wish things were different, that was not reality and this was not a fairy tale. Jaden had to realize by now that this wasn't real. She knew better that this kind of life couldn't last. I didn't have it in me. And I didn't want it. It wasn't practical. Sooner or later, the beast inside me would rage, demanding blood and carnage, and eventually, I would give in, not just because I needed to but because I wanted to. Fear was a fucking aphrodisiac to me, and I fed off it like a damn junkie, always overindulging at every opportunity, and craving it when it was over. And Jaden was the perfect dealer, never in short supply of exactly what I wanted in the purest form.

Even after everything that'd happened, her screams still made me harder than fucking steel. But her laughter also made my chest swell with outright adoration and pride. Fear and disobedience, laughter and charm. Two sides of the same coin, but I didn't know which one I loved more. I suppose it didn't matter. I could have them in equal measure if I wanted, whenever I wanted, however I wanted. That was the beauty of this life.

There's an old tale about two wolves battling for control inside oneself. One white and good. One black and evil. The age-old question of which one wins the internal battle? The one you feed.

At this point, I'd honestly be surprised if my white wolf wasn't a pile of bones yet.

Darren told me this morning it was time to move on to our next destination, and while I was sad to leave Valencia, I was eager to move on to the next surprise in store. Before Darren, I was always adventurous but never had much opportunity to go out and travel since I was too busy with life's responsibilities. I would have made it happen eventually. I could have gone into international law and traveled all over the damn globe, making a difference. Maybe I still could. I had a new identity now. I could start over, start from scratch. It would suck, but I would do it if it meant I could do something with my life.

And then I nearly slapped myself in the face.

Where the fuck were these thoughts coming from?

That future didn't exist anymore. My dreams of becoming a big shot lawyer were buried deep with all the other things I had to leave behind in my old life. Why was this suddenly on my mind? It didn't make sense, and I needed to get it out of my head. I was in a different game now, and I needed to focus on that future to ensure my survival.

I shook my head as the car we were in pulled into the pier, driving all the way down to where the docks were before finally parking. Hopping out, I was met with dozens of fancy boats and yachts, and while they were all nice to look at, I was more concerned with the golden sun that was close to setting against the water.

"This way, Jaden," Darren called, holding out his hand.

I took it and allowed him to lead me down to the docks, walking all the way to the end until we finally stopped at what was the most advanced looking speed boat I've ever seen.

Easily a forty-footer, the boat was gun metal gray with black details, long and narrow, pointed almost like a damn spear. Boating was life when you lived on the coast of the Great Lakes, so I was no newbie to this avenue, but I loved it all the same. I'd give up an entire week of training just to be on a jet ski for thirty minutes, but I didn't make demands anymore – just followed them.

“Are we going for a ride?” I asked, hopeful. I thought we were heading to our next destination on a plane, but maybe it was closer than I thought it would be?

“Sort of,” Darren answered and led me over to the end of the dock so I could step onto the boat.

He followed, as did Clive and Owen, and moved us toward the seating arrangement that rounded the back of the boat. It was probably the most spacious boat I'd ever been on, all sleek and shiny with comfy seating.

“Wait, where's Camaro? I thought we were going back to the jet,” I asked Darren as he sat down beside me.

“She's already there,” he answered.

“Already where?”

“You'll see.”

I suppressed a groan. I fucking hated this, and Darren fucking knew it.

Ignoring my annoyance with his secrecy, Darren wrapped his arm around my shoulders while nodding to the staff to take off. It didn't take long before the wind was whipping through my hair and my focus turned toward the scenery surrounding us. With the sun setting, Valencia lit up with all its beauty, the lights of the city creating a skyline I could hardly look away from.

After a while, the boat circled the area, passing other ships and sailboats. The speed and sheer size of the boat allowed it to cut through the waves of the Balearic Sea like butter, making it a very smooth and enjoyable ride. But it ended too soon.

Twenty minutes into the ride, the boat began to slow as it approached what was probably the largest yacht I had ever seen. My eyes literally bugged out of my head as we got closer, my mind in complete denial that it was this big and we were heading straight for it.

The thing was an absolute mountain and had to be at least four hundred feet with beautiful stylistic curves in architecture and dark windows. Painted a deep shiny black, the numerous gold accents that were visible

complimented the structure in a way luxury could hardly define. There were three decks that I could see, but I was willing to bet there was a fourth at the bottom. I could see a pool and a Jacuzzi tub, but my eyes widened when I thought I saw a helipad toward the bow.

Eventually the boat came to a stop on the side of the yacht, the staff on board working to tether us properly so we wouldn't float away, and my heart was racing. This thing was absolutely incredible, and my excitement to board could hardly be contained.

"Come on," Darren said as he pulled me to a stand and steered me over toward the yacht.

"Can I ask what's happening yet?"

Darren smirked as he helped me step through the large entryway and onto the back deck of the largest yacht I'd ever seen.

"We'll be traveling to the remaining destinations of our honeymoon on *Legion*."

*Legion. No shit.*

I tried to reserve some of my excitement just a little.

"Really? No more planes?"

"We'll take the jet to go home, but other than that, no."

"How long are we going to be on here?"

"For as long as I say we are," Darren answered, his tone retaining a hint of challenge behind it.

*Do not roll your eyes. Do not roll your eyes.*

"Then I'll assume I have plenty of time to explore," I replied, my voice optimistic, altering the tension in the air.

The scowl beginning to form on his face quickly transformed into a devilish smirk.

"Come on, I'll show you around so you don't get lost."

I scoffed. "It's not *that* big of a boat."

Except that it was that big of a boat. Big wasn't even accurate. This wasn't just a yacht; it was a massive superyacht. Although, to me, it was more like an extravagant apartment capable of floating on water. Clad in black, gold, and soft cherry woods, it was easily the finest piece of floating machinery I had ever seen. It had four levels, not three as I had first ascertained, of absolute luxury in ways that were hardly fair. Darren's wealth was fucking obnoxious with how incredible this yacht was.

There was a formal dining room fit with a full aquarium, an office for Darren, a small gym, several sitting rooms each with a flat screen TV, and one with a damn marble fireplace. There was a small pool, a Jacuzzi tub, a glass bottom floor, and a helipad. There were several seating areas on each open deck, two of which had bars, and one had a damn stripper pole on top of a small platform. I rolled my eyes as we walked past it.

The master bedroom had a perfect view of the water with windows lining the entire wall and was spacious enough to be completely comfortable with a full bathroom attached while the other fourteen bedrooms and bathrooms could easily house twenty-five other guests, seventeen of which were the staff, including the captain, while the other seven were guards, including Clive and Owen.

The yacht was basically military grade, which was just like every other toy Darren owned. With bulletproof glass, reinforced steel, panic rooms, an infirmary, and actual fucking cannons installed, the yacht could basically survive a small siege. Secret compartments with weapons were hidden all over the place, and there was even a holding cell for prisoners.

At four hundred and fifty-nine feet, it had a top speed of twenty-five knots and over 90,000 horsepower. There were also two jet skis and a small jet boat stored in the bottom deck. *Legion* was a goddamn beast by right. I was honestly impressed and beyond thankful I didn't have a history of seasickness.

The first night had been amazing. After an hour of exploring, I laid out on the couch with Camaro on the outer deck and watched the stars go by as we cruised along the coast of Spain. Darren had some business to attend to, so it finally gave me some alone time.

Thankfully, Camaro had been given a small doggy sedative to get her to calm down and sleep a little. She was way too excited with all the commotion of the yacht, the staff, the new location and scenery, and the fact that the floor beneath her was constantly moving. The yacht was basically a floating fortress, so she could relax a little this time around.

What was interesting to see was that the staff were completely unconcerned with the armed guards walking around the boat with automatic rifles. Maybe they felt better knowing they were so well protected? Unlike the staff at Darren's estate, these people actually paid attention to me – waiting off at a reasonable distance, asking if I needed anything, if I was hungry or thirsty, and smiling as if they were grateful I was their only

current concern. They were even courteous enough to bring me a blanket while I lounged. It was really nice for once to be noticed and not sheltered in the background as though I wasn't really there.

"You should go to bed, Mrs. Davis," Clive said as he and Owen sat on the other couch opposite me. "Your eyes are dropping."

"Your eyes are drooping," I bantered, not even bothering to look away from the sky.

"Shall I tell your husband you prefer to sleep out here then?"

I grumbled internally. Half of it was because it was still unsettling to hear someone refer to Darren as my husband, and the other half was because Darren only liked me to sleep in one place, and one place only – his bed. And he *hated* coming back to an empty bed. There would be no sleeping under the stars for me.

"Ya know, just because you're bored doesn't mean you have to spoil my evening."

"It's almost midnight, miss. You know Mr. Davis will be finishing up soon," Owen chimed in.

I scoffed. My ass. He'd been away for days. No way was he finished after only being away from me for two hours. I bet he didn't come to bed until after two in the morning.

"Someone obviously doesn't know *Mr. Davis* all that well then if you think that. If you're both tired, just head off. What am I gonna do, jump off the back of the yacht? I'm tagged, so there's no point. And there are still two guards monitoring every floor. Just go. I'll be fine."

They both sighed, annoyed. "You know our orders don't come from you," Clive said. "We don't retire until you do."

I rolled my eyes. "Your orders may not come from me, but I'm still gonna tell you to sit there and shut your faces. I'm not tired yet, and I'm enjoying the scenery too much. Now shush."

That was a lie. I was exhausted, but I was seriously way too comfortable to get up now. Plus, I wanted to maintain some semblance of control if I could. I wasn't a fucking toddler who needed to be told when to go to bed.

But when my lids did start to lower as I fought to keep the sky alive, I saw from the corner of my drooping eyes Clive whisper something into his earpiece. It wasn't one minute later, I heard thundering footsteps against the upper deck heading my way.

"Fuck you both," I muttered under my breath so only they could hear.



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*He circled me. Like a lion prowling over its prey, his eyes dark with challenge and anticipation. My nails bit into my palms as I clenched my fists tightly at my sides, my shoulders straining from the tension coiling away in my body. I tried not to shiver, but it was so fucking cold in this room, the temperature a deliberate tactic to force my dependence on Darren's body heat to stay warm – among all the other tactics to influence psychological bonding.*

*From cold to warmth.*

*From starving to fed.*

*From dirty to clean.*

*From pain to comfort.*

*From fear to lust.*

*Even as I fought to deny it, even as I told myself over and over again what was happening so that I could maintain comprehension, it was getting harder and harder to fight the dependency. The physical and mental exhaustion were taking their toll, the trauma of every day weighing me down until I could barely reach the surface. I was breathing on borrowed time, and soon, that time would run out, and I would succumb. Because succumbing was the only survival tactic I had left. It was the suicide pill currently sitting in my back pocket begging for use, but I couldn't do it.*

*I had to make Darren earn my Stockholm Syndrome.*

*"Are you cold, princess? You look like it." Darren ran a knuckle softly down the side of my arm, his light touch drawing a shiver from my naked body.*

*He moved to stand in front of me, his suit-covered body blocking my view from the bed, the bed I wasn't allowed to lay in unless he gave me*

permission. My back ached from sleeping in that fucking cage for so many days I'd already lost track.

"I'm fine," I replied, my eyes locked on the buttons of his dark blue dress shirt and noticing he wasn't wearing a tie today.

He sighed like he was disappointed and walked over to the locked mini fridge he kept in the corner of the room. I didn't move from where I stood, even as he returned and stopped directly behind me. That was when I felt the sudden burst of cold water being poured over my head, drenching my hair and sloshing down my body.

I gasped as the cold penetrated my nerves, shooting down my spine as my shoulders hunched all the way to my ears. I could hear Darren toss the empty water bottle onto the floor and come back around to my front.

"That w-wasn't fucking necessary," I muttered as my teeth began to chatter.

A light slap to the face was my reward, my wet hair now clinging to my pulsing cheek.

"Watch your fucking mouth," he warned me, to which I said nothing, choosing to stand there and shiver in silence instead.

He chose to do the same as well, watching me in silence, his eyes raking over every frozen inch of me until they settled on the hardened nipples of my breasts. I knew what he was thinking before it even appeared on his face, and it only made me feel even more vulnerable than I already was. Making his next move, Darren began to undo the buttons of his shirt, revealing the smooth tanned skin underneath, the hard ridges of his abs and pectorals reminding me of all the lethal strength that came with that body.

He was tempting me with the vast warmth that body could provide. And I hated him for it.

Keeping his shirt and jacket on, he stepped toward me, taking my face in his deliciously warm hands. "Why do you insist on suffering when you know you don't have to," he asked, his voice soft as he tilted my mouth toward his.

"Why do you insist on complaining when you know you're enjoying this?" I replied through gritted teeth.

He gave me a small laugh before his thumbs wiped away the excess water from my face. "You won't last forever, Jaden. Deep down, you know how much you want to give in to me."

*I almost cried at the truth of that, Darren's words digging into my very soul, taking root where they weren't welcome.*

*When I closed my eyes in sorrow, Darren took advantage and pressed his lips to mine, his kiss soft and gentle, promising a thousand lies I wanted to believe in. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I carefully pressed my body into his, the warmth of his bare skin eliciting a moan of relief that I couldn't restrain if I tried. My response only encouraged him as he deepened the kiss, his tongue plundering my mouth that served to influence the blossoming heat now swarming in my belly, the heat that continued to travel lower until it reached the very spot I feared it would.*

*The moment Darren released my lips was the moment I attempted to shove him away, my tears continuing to fall while my chest rose and fell with the anxiety only I could create.*

*"Stop it," I muttered, my eyes wild with anger and fear.*

*Darren just slowly shook his head before reaching for my wrists. I tried to pull them away, stepping back, but he was so much quicker than me, snatching my limbs like a cobra and yanking me toward him. He swiftly turned me so that my back was to his chest, his hand catching both my wrists in one and pressing them to my own chest so he could keep me pinned against him. His other hand slammed against my pubic bone, his palm pushing against the bare waxed skin until his finger curled between my lips.*

*He chuckled darkly as his fingers stroked through the obvious moisture between my legs, my mortification and his victory a deadly mix between the two of us.*

*"You see, Jaden? You respond so well to me," he drawled as he stroked my pussy, his touch spreading my wetness and waking up all those sensitive nerve endings. "Why do you keep trying to deny the obvious truth?"*

*"This is so unfair," I whispered my plea as I struggled against him, trying so hard to ignore the pleasure he was creating. Even as I hated him, I couldn't deny how good it felt.*

*"Stop thinking about what's fair and start thinking about how much you want me to make you come right now," he murmured into my ear, the scruff of his jaw brushing against my skin and igniting more flames inside me.*

*With one final attempt at a fight, I locked my knees together and dropped all my weight to the floor, hoping his grip on me would slip, but he just reacted accordingly. Dropping to the floor with me, he leaned against*

*the footboard of the bed, keeping me pinned against his chest while his legs wrapped around both of mine to pull them wide apart, exposing my aching pussy. He then gave it a quick slap, causing me to jolt and cringe.*

*“Stop fighting me, little girl,” he warned, his tone turning venomous and making me shrink inside. “This is happening whether you want it to or not.”*

*I couldn’t stop the moan that escaped my lips as Darren’s fingers expertly stroked my flesh, bringing me right to the brink of orgasm before stopping abruptly. My breathing was so heavy I could barely catch it as I fought against the pleasure I wanted so badly to be completed.*

*Darren’s teeth then nipped my ear. “Tell me who you belong to, and I’ll let you come.”*

*I shook my head as I bit my damn tongue. “Go to hell.”*

*Darren’s hand reared back and slapped my pussy so hard I cried out, my legs involuntarily trying to close but unable to move a single inch, still trapped by Darren’s legs.*

*“Try again,” he demanded, his fingers slowly sliding along my dripping labia again.*

*I writhed and struggled against him, his hold so tight and unyielding as I fought for my dignity and sanity. My legs shook from the tension while my stomach clenched in desperation, and with each gentle stroke and each cruel pause, I grew to want it so badly I could hardly stand it, the sexual frustration driving me mad with need.*

*I hated how absolutely fucking useless my pride was down here.*

*“Just say it, Jaden,” Darren coaxed me. “I promise it will be worth it.” His fingers paused just at the base of my clit; one more stroke and it would be the death of me. And my arm was growing tired from holding the fucking gun against my temple.*

*Just pull the fucking trigger already.*

*“I belong to you,” I finally bawled to which Darren granted me the mercy I sought and brought me to such a climax it wrecked my entire body, wave after wave of pleasure pulsing through my veins until I was crying from the relief of my own destruction.*

*“There’s my good girl,” Darren said as he rained sweet little kisses down my temple, the triumphant approval in his voice driving my guilt straight home. From the warmth of his bare chest radiating at my back, my orgasmic high, and freshly subdued state, he’d won another round in this*

little game we played. And I did not want to reflect on how much it had just cost me.

Picking me up from the floor, Darren carried my lifeless body to the bed and laid me down to pull me against him. With my face buried in his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around me, I took the warmth I had paid for.

With my face pressed against his chest, I waited for the chill in my bones to slowly dissipate, each second becoming less torturous than the last. Only when I could finally feel my hands did I notice the quiet tears that fell from my face onto Darren's naked skin. I didn't even know what my tears were for at this point. But as my shivering dispelled, I came to realize they were from relief – relief that my suffering had stalled, even if only for a moment.

Laying there with him like that, I could feel myself being cocooned with a poisonous lie, transformed with toxins that would make me a slave for reward. I knew it would get easier and easier every time I sold a little bit of myself just for a moment of comfort. It would go on like this until I no longer even blinked at his commands. And that fucking terrified me.

What the fuck would be left of me after this? What would I become?

This was supposed to be my metamorphosis, but what was the point of the metamorphosis of a butterfly if it emerged with no wings?

"Mrs. Davis, time to wake up."

I woke with a jolt, gasping away from the hand that dared to shake my shoulder and inhaling desperately for breath. A young woman with frightened eyes clutched her shoulders as she leaned away from me in shock. That was when I realized I was holding out my butterfly knife, ready to strike. Quickly retracting it, I placed it back under my pillow where it belonged.

"Oh, my gosh, Mrs. Davis, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. You were crying in your sleep. I thought you might be having a nightmare," she said carefully. "Are you all right?"

With my hand on my chest over my heart, I fought to catch my breath while internally fighting off the nightmare. I hadn't dreamed of that scene in a long time, and I worked hard to forget it. I could still see Darren's smug face after he stuffed me back into that goddamn cage when he was done with me. Fuck, I needed to calm down.

"Yeah, just, can you do me a favor? Ask me what I had for dinner last night."

She looked puzzled for a second but did it anyway. “What did you have for dinner last night?”

I took a deep breath, trying to remember the easiest fucking question, reaching back to the details of my dinner. “Chicken with rosemary, I think? There were baby potatoes, green beans, and broccoli.”

She hesitated for a moment before she asked me another question. “And what did you have to drink?” she continued.

I quickly snatched at the rope she offered me, hoping I could pull myself out of that dark hole I needed to escape from, the memories agonizing in their authenticity. “It was a white wine. But I don’t remember what kind. It was sweet. Maybe a Moscato or Riesling?”

She nodded. “Did you have anything for dessert?”

“A raspberry sorbet. Dark chocolate shavings on top with a mint leaf.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Yeah, it was amazing. I wished I could have finished the whole thing, but I was so full. The chef here is fantastic.”

“I agree. She makes a fantastic Cordon Bleu. You should try it next time if you like chicken,” the woman replied with a gentle smile.

“Thanks, I will,” I said as I settled against the headboard, releasing a deep breath of what was starting to feel like relief. “What’s your name?”

“Natasha, ma’am,” she answered with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Natasha.”

She nodded. “Better?”

I sighed and nodded. “Yes, thank you. Sorry, I just need a little distraction.”

She shrugged. “My sister has anxiety and gets panic attacks like that, so I picked up on what you needed. The distraction method is a good strategy.”

“It’s worked so far, but if you don’t mind, can we just keep this between you and me? I don’t like to give Darren cause to worry about my stupid nightmares and panic attacks.”

“Your secret is safe with me. Do you want me to bring you anything? Glass of water? Crackers?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m okay. Thank you, though. I think I just need a shower. Where’s Darren? Do you know?”

“I believe Mr. Davis is out on the upper deck having breakfast. He actually sent me to wake you.”

“What time is it?” I asked almost frantically.

“Just after nine a.m.”

“Shit.”

Unconcerned with the fact I was naked, I scampered out of bed and hurried into the bathroom toward the shower.

“I’ll let him know you’re getting ready!” Natasha called from behind the door.

“Thanks!” I shouted back but then ran back to stick my head out the door. “Also, sorry for pulling a knife on you,” I said with a wince.

She smiled and nodded. “No worries. I’ve encountered much worse on this yacht before,” she replied with a wink and disappeared down the hall.

*Well, that was slightly unsettling.*

I imagined that just about all of Darren’s staff were accustomed to his brutal way of life, but I didn’t know how far that stretched. Apparently, all the way to the Mediterranean.

Once I was clean, I found a full-length white, pink, and navy-blue striped sundress with a slit in the front that was held together by silver buttons and threw it on with a pair of matching silver flip-flops. I grabbed my aviators and a bottle of sunscreen and headed upstairs toward the upper deck where Darren was waiting.

As I came on to the deck, I had to fight back the memories of the nightmare and try to focus on the now. That wasn’t me anymore. I survived. I overcame that awful mentality and built myself into something greater. I would not go back there. I would die first.

“There’s my pretty wife,” Darren said with a cocky smirk as he took a sip of his coffee, his hand scratching behind Camaro’s ears as she sat there like the good obedient dog I wasn’t.

“Morning,” I said as I took a seat across from him, hoping my aviators could hide the dwindling panic on my face. But instead of focusing on how I felt, I tried to focus on him instead.

After being used to seeing Darren in formal business attire all the time, he could still pull off casual pretty well. With a tan short-sleeved button-up over a black T-shirt and black shorts, his hair styled to perfection, and those classic aviators I liked, he looked as cool as a goddamn cucumber.

“Sleep okay?” he asked as he looked me up and down.

“Yeah,” I replied as Camaro came over to sniff me hello. I petted her head and kissed her face. “It was great being rocked to sleep by the water last night. You?”



“Just fine,” he answered. “Now, eat while everything it’s still warm.”

I looked over the array of breakfast foods spread over the table, noticing Darren had clearly already eaten as he continued to sip on his coffee while reading something on his phone. Decided, I spooned some scrambled eggs, bacon, and mixed fruit onto my plate, poured myself a cup of coffee, and then stared out at the water as I ate with Camaro resting on the floor beside me.

We were moving north along the coast in the Balearic Sea, and it made me think about where we were going next. France was the next country connected to Spain, and then there was Italy. And if we didn’t stop at any of those places, I was going to be pissed.

“You’re awfully quiet this morning,” Darren commented. “Not gonna badger me about where we’re going next?”

I smirked. “Would it make a difference?”

“Nope.”

“Then I suppose I’ll employ a new strategy.”

“Oh. Well, now you’ve got my attention,” he drawled, a brow raised. “What’s your strategy?”

“I’m not going to guess anymore,” I answered playfully, my eyes narrowing at him over my coffee mug. “I’m simply going to tell you where we’re going.”

“Really now? Please, do tell.”

I smiled. “Considering the direction we’re headed, France is the next country along this coast. And if you think we’re going to pass up France on this yacht without stopping there at some point, you will have a *very* disappointed wife on your hands, and I don’t think you want that. Not on our honeymoon. So, France it is.”

I tried not to smirk, but he knew I just cornered him there.

*Your move, smart ass.*

With that challenging look on his face, he leaned forward with his elbows braced against his knees, fingers interlocking. And then a bright wide smile cracked across his face. That genuine one I hated to love.

“That is quite the strategy,” he said, with a chuckle. “I would certainly hate to disappoint my wife on our honeymoon.”

I shook my head, my eyes never leaving his as I kept my teasing smirk in play. “Nope, that would be a tragedy.”

Darren suddenly stood; his steps moving in my direction and making my pulse quicken. “Do you know what else would be a tragedy?” he asked, his voice smooth with danger. I unconsciously braced myself before setting my coffee down.

“Hmmm?” was all I could muster as I stared up at him, my mouth suddenly dry.

Darren bent low so that his mouth was right against my ear, his breath tickling my cheek and sending shivers down my spine.

“If I didn’t punish my wife for threatening her husband on their honeymoon,” he drawled.

The only thing I had time to do was gasp as Darren grabbed me from under my arms and tossed me over his shoulder. Camaro stood and immediately began to bark, yielding only as soon as Darren whistled his stupid alpha command to yield.

Fear, lust, and what I hoped was only sarcasm had my body pulsing with anticipation as Darren sat down on one of the long wooden lounge chairs and threw me across his lap.

The first slap on my ass stunned me, immobilizing my attempts to fight him off – something that was both pointless and prohibited when it came to this. When Darren realized that my dress was too long and stiff to hike up, he just gripped the back and ripped it open, exposing my ass the way he wanted.

I gasped in disappointed shock. “Dammit, Darren! I actually liked that one!”

Another hard slap was his response. “How’s your strategy working out now?” he taunted playfully as another slap followed his words.

“Yeah, well, I bet we’re still going to France!” I shouted. Another slap, harder this time.

“And you think threatening me is the best way to get what you want?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It was hardly a threat! You’re just mad because I actually cornered you.”

His palm came down again, my skin pulsing with heat while my clit began to pulse with need. This man had ruined my body in so many ways I couldn’t keep track anymore.

“Are you going to lie and tell me I was wrong?” I yelled in rebellion.

Darren then flipped me over, grabbed the ends of my dress, and ripped it up to my waist, causing the silver buttons to go flying everywhere. Tearing

my thong out of his way, he was inside me in seconds, my already trained pussy only too eager to accept him.

“No, my little queen,” he rumbled as he leaned over me, his elbows pressing into the cushion beside my head. “You’re not wrong. I *am* taking you to France.” Darren then pulled out and thrust back in, eliciting a gasped moan. “But your method of info retrieval has its benefits for us both. You get what you want, and I get to punish you for manipulating your way into getting it. Very clever. You should do it more often.”

Darren then gripped my hips, lifted them, and began to fuck me with abandon. It took all my strength not to scream in brutal ecstasy, trying to salvage some privacy even though we were on the top deck with nothing much to conceal us. I supposed Darren didn’t care if anyone saw us fucking on his own yacht. They should know better to remain discreet and mind their own business. But there was always a guard nearby who liked to sneak a peek when Darren had his back turned, like the one smirking behind the bar before he disappeared around the corner.

But with each punishing thrust, it became easier and easier to forget about absolutely anyone or anything else until I was coming all over Darren’s cock.

“Fuck!” he growled as he finally stilled inside me, his warm cum coating every inch of my core.

I was still fighting to catch my breath when he pulled out of me and tucked himself away before rising.

“I want you to meet me at the bottom deck an hour after lunch. Wear a bathing suit. I have a surprise for you,” he said with that sexy little grin and then turned to walk away.

“You know I hate your surprises!” I called after him.

“This one you’ll like. I promise,” he called back without turning around as he made his way down the stairs.

“I’d better,” I muttered under my breath. Otherwise, there would be hell to pay.

An hour after lunch, I was cleaned up and dressed in a short yellow sundress with a hot pink bikini underneath, and my hair braided down my back. I made my way down to the bottom deck with Clive, Owen, and Camaro, finding Darren with two other guards waiting. He was dressed in black swim shorts and some fancy laced-up water shoes, holding two life jackets.

I suddenly felt myself get excited but kept it contained.

“Come on,” Darren said with a grin and opened a door that led to the back of the yacht.

Inside was a tender garage, worthy of notice. Glossy wooden floors and pretty white walls with large windows complemented the space of water that contained one floating jet ski hooked to a railing. Now that I had a closer look, I couldn’t help but smile at the black and silver Kawasaki 300 LX Ultra and marvel to myself at its 300 horsepower capabilities and supercharged engine. Not to mention, I wouldn’t put it past Darren to have installed upgraded modifications. That jet ski was fast as fuck, and I tried not to squirm too much at the idea of being able to ride one – hopefully by myself. Riding bitch wouldn’t nearly be as much fun for me.

So where was the second one? I knew there were two.

Darren then pushed a button on the wall, and a giant white garage door opened to reveal the sea behind us, causing Camaro to bark behind me at the ruckus. That was when I noticed Scott was riding the missing jet ski, riding back and forth in front of the anchored yacht.

When did Scott get here?

But as I watched Scott maneuver on the jet ski, I started to recognize what it was – a Seadoo Spark Trix. I smiled from nostalgia. My cousin had

the same jet ski, and while it wasn't nearly as fast as the Kawasaki, it had many other capabilities that made it a super fun ride.

After a moment of watching Scott ride the jet ski back and forth, it started to irritate me. He was such a boring rider; he didn't deserve the privilege. We'd better not be riding like that.

"Pllllleeeeeaaaassssee tell me I get to ride my own. Please!" I begged. I was not above begging at this point.

Darren turned to me and handed me the life jacket. "Scott is warming yours up." My face lit up with excitement before he was even done speaking. "You stay near me, keep away from other boats, and watch your speed."

His harsh tone was full of warning, allowing no room for arguments, which was damn fine with me. I was about to ride my own jet ski. I'd agree to damn near anything, so I nodded vigorously. "Okay, got it."

"Do not make me regret this, Jaden." For once, that dark, stern look on his face was not enough to intimate me. I was so fucking ready for this.

"Oh, you won't," I assured him, my mouth unable to unhinge the grin plastered all over my face as I pulled off my dress and fastened my life jacket.

I could see the skepticism all over Darren's face as he fastened his own life jacket and moved to pull the other jet ski out to the launch pad of the yacht. Once Scott noticed Darren, he began to close in on the yacht and docked quickly with the help of the staff.

"Think you can handle this baby?" Scott asked me with a cocky smile on his face.

I smirked. "Considering the weak sauce you were pulling out there? I got something for ya."

Clive and Owen snickered behind me, and Scott full-out laughed, but Darren wasn't impressed, considering the glare I was receiving right now.

"You don't have shit for him, Jaden. You stick to the rules, or this will be over before it even starts," Darren growled at me as he moved his jet ski into the water.

"Relax. I'm just really excited, okay?"

"Well, then move your excited little ass onto the jet ski so we can go," he replied, mounting his jet ski and pushing off into the water.

"Here's the key," Scott said, handing the black cord with the yellow floater. "You know what you're doing?" he asked as I fastened it to the D

ring of my life jacket and hopped onto the waiting jet ski.

“I used to ride this very same model. I hope the newer additions are even better than the last.”

“All right, have fun,” Scott said as he pushed me away from the yacht so I could float out into the water where Darren was already waiting. Connecting the key to the port, I pushed the start button and the watercraft rumbled to life.

The deep purr of the engine between my legs only further fueled the excitement. Fuck, I was so ready to go.

“Ready?” Darren called as he watched.

Grinning like a lunatic, I quickly switched the jet ski into sport mode, hopefully without Darren noticing.

“Let’s go!” I yelled. And with that, we took off into the water.

Of all the time I’ve spent with Darren, if there was ever a time I felt truly alive, it was right now. With the sun on my face, the wind blowing through my braid, and the spray of the sea on my skin, for the first time in a long time, I felt happiness. That was what jet skiing was for me. It was freedom. Freedom to ride the span of open water for as long and as fast as I wanted. There were no roadblocks, no traffic, no limits – just absolute freedom. And it was amazing.

The water was calm, with minimal waves to create the choppiness that made jet skiing uncomfortable. The only waves that seemed to be present were from the other boats floating along the coast. I followed Darren as best as I could without going off on my own too much. He was doing a steady thirty mph over the waves, making it pretty easy to keep up. Almost too easy, which was why I found myself falling back a lot to jump off the waves created by the wake of his jet ski, screaming with joy and exhilaration. And that was when Darren created the chase.

He suddenly veered off to the side, making a quick turn in the opposite direction, and I was only too happy to follow suit. He made a series of figure-eights, creating all kinds of waves for me to chase and jump to the point where I almost forgot to keep him within my sight. But I could still hear him whipping around, having some fun, same as me.

We played around in the water like that for a good hour, circling the anchored yacht, admiring the coast and all the other boats that passed through the area. I didn’t know how long Darren would let us stay out here, so I wanted to enjoy as much of it as I possibly could. Jerking my jet ski to

the left, I cut against the water, spinning in circles and launching myself off my own waves, hollering with joy as I went.

Until a massive speed boat, who clearly couldn't see me, veered suddenly into my direction. I had only seconds to react, clutching the throttle and swerving to the left, missing the side of the boat by only a few feet. But my evasive maneuvers weren't enough to save me from the enormous wake resulting from the powerful engine of that speed boat. I didn't even have time to release the throttle before I was already soaring through the air, sideways.

The jet ski was almost completely flipped over by the time I crashed into the water, the temperature a quick shock to my system. Thankful for my life jacket, I quickly floated to the surface, gasping for air as I fought to calm my now racing heart. My eyes scanned for the jet ski and any other rogue boats that might want to run me over. I found the jet ski floating about twenty feet away, the waves taking it farther and farther from me, so I made a beeline for it, swimming toward it as fast as I could before Darren realized what happened.

But I never made it that far.

The roar of another engine came up behind me, causing me to turn and find a very angry looking Darren behind me.

"I'm fine! I'm okay!" I shouted at him, hoping to get him to calm down before the storm hit me, but he was already reaching down to grip the back of my life jacket, and hauling me out of the water. He set me down on the seat in front of him, braced his arms against the handlebars, and took off, completely abandoning my jet ski.

"Darren, what are you doing?! I'm fine!" I yelled again, trying to turn so he could see my face, but his body imprisoned mine in place. "You're overacti—"

"Shut up, Jaden," he said, his voice deadly calm against my ear. All it took was that dark tone to make my stomach drop and churn into knots.

We were back at the yacht within seconds, Darren quickly stepping off the jet ski to turn and yank me to a standing position while the staff helped to dock the jet ski.

"Find that boat," was all Darren said to Scott as he strode past him with my upper arm held tightly in his grasp.

I actually had to work to keep up with him as he nearly dragged me through the yacht and into our bedroom, all the while fighting to maintain

my composure. He was scaring the shit out of me, and I hadn't even done anything wrong.

As soon as the door was closed, his hands immediately went for the clips of my life jacket to roughly pull them apart. I decided I couldn't let this continue.

I placed my hands over each of his forearms to get his attention and held on tight. "Darren, stop. Just look at me. I'm okay."

My life jacket was ripped away without a single glance from him. "Not another word," he ordered.

No, I couldn't let this stand. He could not react like this every time something bad happened to me.

I quickly stepped away from him. "What is the matter with you! Look at me! Am I injured?"

"What did I just say?"

"Am I injured!" I shouted at him.

"That's not the point!" His voice boomed over mine, making me jump. "The one time. The one fucking time I finally let you go off on your own, and this is what happens. First, you're almost eaten by wolves, then almost killed at our own wedding, and now you *almost* get run over by a goddamn speed boat. And you wonder why I prefer to keep you locked away inside all the time!"

I scoffed at the absolute hypocrisy of his words. As if I'd never been harmed within the "safety" of his estate. But he needed to hear something far more important.

"Yet here I still stand, Darren," I said softly but firmly, spreading my arms wide. "Alive and well. Yet you still insist on overreacting as if I am some kind of fragile flower no matter how many times I prove otherwise. You know damn well I deserve more credit than that."

His scowl was fierce, that blazing intensity in his eyes making me want to back down, but this argument was bound to happen at some point. He had no basis for this reaction. I needed him to know it wasn't the end of the world if I got hurt. I'd live. I'd likely been through worse anyway. I didn't want him worrying like this all the damn time.

"I don't care what you think you're capable of. That doesn't mean I suddenly throw caution to the wind just because you can catch a knife and hold your own against my youngest brother."



I was suddenly taken aback, insulted. If I had the courage, I would have slapped him.

“So now we’re going to underplay my capabilities? Thanks for that. I’m really glad to see all my hard work has really gained your confidence in me.” I was overstepping with my attitude now, but some days, he just brought out the worst in me.

“You better watch your ass, little girl,” he warned. “You haven’t even touched the surface of how dangerous things can be, and I’ll be damned before I let you think it’s just another walk in the park and everybody lives.”

I shot him daggers. “Don’t insult me. I am not so naïve as to think everything is that simple or easy. But if there’s anything that I have proven more times than I can count, it’s that I’m a survivor, Darren. I thought you would have figured that out by now.”

His hand was on my throat and pinning me to the bed before I could even blink.

“And what exactly have you survived, Jaden?” he mocked, his thumb pressing right under the soft spot of my jaw, making my eyes water while I clawed at his arm. “You think your life has really been that bad? You still think that what’s been done to you makes you a survivor? Wrong. It’s not just about surviving, it’s about adapting.”

“I’m not the only one who needs to adapt,” I croaked, and then lifted my legs to wrap them around his arm, sneaking my foot under his chin and pushing up and into his throat. It forced his hand to release my throat just enough so I could breathe, but my reprieve didn’t last very long since he just lifted me up with the one arm and slammed me back down onto the bed. It did give me the one final moment I needed to rear my legs back and kick him in the chest. It pushed him back enough for him to completely let go so I could somersault backward off the bed and into standing position, my chest heaving with exertion.

“We talked about this, remember?” I growled at him. “Marrying you meant increasing the risk of potential danger, which is why I train as much as I do. So that I can handle things when they get ugly, yet you’re the one still in panic mode when the inevitable finally happens like you keep saying it will.”

Darren narrowed those steely blues right at my damn soul.

“You’re my wife, Jaden. You belong to me. No matter how much skill you possess, you are still my responsibility. Don’t ever expect me to remain indifferent when I know you’re in danger. You don’t get to act like you’re indestructible and dismiss me as if I haven’t already almost watched you die several times,” he said, his voice low and dark.

“If you were so worried about my safety, then you should have left me alone and let someone else buy me.”

The words came out of me before I could stop them, and I tried to mask the horror on my face. It was a bold statement, one that made my spine tingle with worry, but it was the goddamn truth. Darren regarded me for a moment, a tiny glint of regret caught in his eye before he quickly blinked it away and slowly shook his head.

“You’re right, I should have. But I’m a selfish man, Jaden, and I don’t care what methods I have to instill to keep you safe and keep you mine.”

“Then you will have to *adapt* to the idea that you will not always be able to protect me. And where you fail, you will have to trust in my abilities to handle the rest from there without you. Otherwise, training every day like I do is just a waste of time.”

“Precautionary measures are not a waste of time, no matter how much you disagree with them. I will not have a weakling for a wife, but nor will I have a reckless one either.”

My brows shot up of their own volition. “Reckless?! Are you serious? You’re the one who invited a small war to our wedding that almost got me killed, and you want to call me reckless? That’s real cute.”

“You better watch your attitude,” he warned again, his nostrils flaring as he took another menacing step toward me. “If you hadn’t forced your bodyguards to waste their time on a non-threat, you wouldn’t have been in that situation.”

I just sneered at him.

“I wouldn’t have been in that situation if you had done a better job at containment. But it’s okay, Darren; apparently, it’s still a wife’s duty to clean up after her husband.”

That earned me a hard slap across the face.

It didn’t matter how hard I trained or how much skill I possessed, Darren was still so much faster. If he wanted to hit me, there wasn’t shit I could do about it. White-hot pain seared into my cheek as my upper body crashed into the bed from the force of his hand. Darren was already on me

before my body even bounced back on the bed, his hand pinning the nape of my neck down while his other yanked down my still wet bathing suit bottoms.

“And apparently, it’s still a husband’s duty to remind his wife of her place.”

The taste of blood was already flooding my mouth.

“I love how you resort to violence every time you know I’m right,” I groaned through gritted teeth.

Darren’s hand came down hard on my bare and damp ass, the pain making me gasp while simultaneously taking my breath away.

“Let’s not forget how much you love it when I do,” he growled menacingly into my ear.

He was merciless against my skin, his palm relentless with its brutality until my skin bruised and broke. All the while, the wetness between my legs growing under its Master’s unmistakable call. I was sobbing and soaking by the time he finished, my nails tearing at the delicate threads of the comforter while tears stained them.

I didn’t even get a breath of reprieve before his cock speared inside me.

“Fuck!” I cried out on a sob, but he was already rearing back and grinding away inside me.

He gripped my wet braid, wrapping it around his hand and yanking my head back in an awkward and uncomfortable position.

“Your disrespectful mouth may still be having trouble understanding its place, but your pussy sure as fuck doesn’t. It’s fucking weeping for me, my little wife, just like I trained it to.”

I just groaned into the mattress, wishing I could drown out the pleasure he was creating, but even as I focused on the burn of my ass, it only further fueled the growing heat inside me.

“I don’t know where the fuck this attitude is coming from, but it ends now. Do not presume that you know or understand everything that goes on around you, Jaden. You don’t know shit, and you should be thankful I try to keep it that way for your sake.”

God, with the way he was pounding into me, those hard, punishing thrusts were going to have me coming very, very shortly. Noticing the clenches of my core, Darren abruptly pulled out, leaving my gaping opening at a disappointing loss.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he growled, releasing my hair and gripping my hips to bring them up. His hand reached down to scoop up my juices to smear it up between my ass cheeks and I could feel myself pale.

“No!” I protested, moving as quickly as I could to escape, but Darren’s hand was already pressing into the nape of my neck, holding me down.

“Move again and I swear to God I will make this so much worse,” he threatened, and I believed him, forcing myself to relax and accept what was to come.

His stiff cock, now slathered in my juices, began to push at my sphincter, causing my mind to fight with my body to relax. I forced myself to release my deathly grip on the comforter and exhale to allow Darren to finally breach my walls with one final push. I cried out at the rough invasion as he gripped my hips, reared back, and entered again. Once my ass finally adjusted to him, he didn’t hold back anymore. Each thrust was not meant for pleasure, it was meant for pain, and it was all I felt as I whimpered quietly through gritted teeth, forcing myself to not clench and bare it.

“You should have anticipated that fucking boat,” he groaned, his cock relentless inside me. “You should have known better. But you didn’t because you were too busy having fun and stopped paying attention to your surroundings.” His voice was smooth and low, controlled but laced with so much warning.

He smacked me hard against the side of my ass, causing me to jolt forward as I fought to stay quiet.

“When you’re on your own, suddenly your regard for your own safety is of no concern to you, and it ends now. Until you learn to prioritize that, I will stop giving you opportunities, and your ass will stay benched. Do you understand?”

I gasped out a small, “Yes,” as he drove in harder, but it wasn’t sufficient. He smacked my ass again right where he had before and gripped my braid to yank my head back painfully.

“Do you understand?” he bellowed, that sharp horrific tone making me cringe inside.

“Yes!” I shrieked desperately.

“Tell me who you belong to,” he ordered.

“You,” I sobbed, prepared to retract every word I said if he would just relent.

But it only got worse. His thrusts increased in speed, the intense feeling of such fullness becoming too great to withstand until finally he stopped, his warm cum filling me entirely as he cursed under his breath. He released my hair then, and I fell forward onto the bed, barely catching myself with my limp arms. I laid there under him as he pulled himself from my ass, my breathing erratic and my heart thumping wildly into the mattress. I wanted to pass out right then and there, but Darren wasn't quite finished yet. His arm snaked around for my throat until his hand found what he was looking for and pulled me back.

"I am *done* sacrificing your safety and my peace of mind for your happiness. Done. Do not leave this room until I tell you to. I have some shit I need to take care of now."

He released me with a jerk, and I watched him as he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him and leaving me in shambles. And here we were having such a good time.

Lying on the bed, I took a deep, calming breath and began to assess any damage to my body. I fucking ached all over, my ass being the worst of it. I tucked the loose strands of my wet hair behind my ears, then slowly stood on shaky legs and went in search of some pain meds. I rummaged through my bag for my hairbrush to first fix my fucked-up braid when I came across a small white bottle with the words *aspirin* written across it. Thank fuck.

Flipping the lid, I popped one white pill into my mouth and swallowed it down with a handful of water from the sink. Unraveling my braid, I brushed my hair out, applied some soothing lotion to my still stinging ass, changed into a thong and purple tank top with a built-in sports bra, and laid on the bed, waiting for the aspirin to kick in so I could sleep the rest of the day away.

What an epic fucking disaster.

Had I really been too distracted to notice that speed boat coming my way? I wasn't a newbie at this. I knew how to watch for other boats when on the water like that. I knew never to rely on them to see me; I had to be the one to watch for them. How the fuck had I let that happen? Why did I always have to ruin every opportunity Darren finally threw my way?

Cramps began to build in my gut just thinking of the sass I threw at him during that argument, an argument that probably should never have happened. Fuck, I'd probably already ruined the entire honeymoon now, damaging Darren's already fragile trust in me. But he was notorious for

overreacting when it came to me, and I knew better than to gage those. So why the fuck had I suddenly thrown my concerns out the window and forgot about him? It didn't make any sense. What was happening to me? Was I becoming too comfortable again? Or was it just a momentary lapse of judgment?

After about thirty minutes of deliberation, my brain slowly stopped giving a fuck about my transgressions. Instead, it focused on the beauty of the water as the sunlight glistened against it, reflecting that perfect sky above. With the birds flying and cawing outside the window and the sound of the water crashing against the yacht, it instantly no longer mattered what had happened nearly an hour ago. I was alive and witnessing the beauty of nature right in front of me. I should be grateful to be so privileged right now.

Fuck, that water was beautiful. With the sun sparkling off it, it looked like little diamonds floating on the surface. For some reason, it was fucking mesmerizing, the intensity of it driving away all my worries, anxieties and insecurities. I felt something rising in my blood as I watched the water go by, a source of energy bursting from out of nowhere, and all I could suddenly feel was pure fucking joy.

I started to laugh out loud at the audacity of it. Why the fuck was I suddenly so happy?

I walked into the bathroom to look at my face, and all I could do was fucking laugh at the big stupid smile on my face. What the actual fuck?

And then the sound of loud hovering waves in the air caught my ears, bringing my attention to the windows where a small black helicopter was flying over the water, away from the yacht.

"Holy shit," I murmured. Why was that so amazing right now? Why was I feeling like this? Why did I suddenly feel like running a marathon? What the fuck!

I raced over to the bottle of pills I'd taken, pouring several out into my hand. They looked like normal round tablets, but with a line indented in the middle. Had Darren finally slipped happy pills into my bag? What the fuck had I seriously taken?

It only took thirty minutes for my men to locate the asshole who almost decimated Jaden in the water. After they grabbed Jaden's abandoned jet ski, they took off after him, carefully following until he finally docked somewhere near the coast of Marseille. Three French men and two women, all in their late forties, were already passed out from the various empty liquor bottles splayed all over the floor. The sun wasn't even setting yet, and they were already done for the day. Jesus fuck.

As much as I wanted to slowly rip them all limb from limb, I was short on time, and our location wasn't the most discreet. I had to settle for my silencer and quick bullets to their heads. Unsatisfactory, but at least I didn't have to worry about them causing any more trouble in this fucking area.

I left Scott to finish dousing the bodies with their remaining booze and set the C4 charge. Reaching for my phone in my pocket, I pulled it out to notice I had ten missed calls from Clive before it started ringing again.

"What the fuck happened now?" I answered, knowing something had gone wrong.

"Sir. We believe Jaden may have ingested X," Clive said quickly.

I swore I heard him incorrectly. "Excuse me?"

Clive sighed. "She took what she thought was aspirin, but it's very clear it wasn't."

"How the fuck is that even possible?" I growled. Drugs were not allowed on my yacht, and if one of my staff disobeyed that rule, they would be meeting a very ugly end.

"We don't know, sir. She said she found them in one of her overnight bags."

“Motherfucker. How much did she take?”

“Luckily, she only took one pill, so judging by the size of them, likely about eighty milligrams.”

“Fuck! She could have fucking died if she’d taken two! Jesus!”

“What happened?” Scott asked as he walked toward the car from the docks.

“Somehow, my wife managed to ingest X while I’m not even there to enjoy it,” I muttered to him, keeping the phone to my ear as I opened the door to the front passenger seat. If Jaden’s infectious excitement came just from sightseeing, I couldn’t imagine how hilarious she’d be on ecstasy. But still, it wasn’t exactly on my list of things to experience with my wife.

“What the fuck? How?” Scott asked as he settled into the driver’s seat, pulled out the detonator, and activated it. The boat behind us exploded, the loud boom giving rise to the flames that enveloped the vessel before the hull began to sink into the water.

“I don’t know. She thought it was aspirin,” I answered and then went back to my phone. “Tell me you’re keeping her hydrated,” I said to Clive as Scott started the car.

“She’s gotten one bottle of water down, but all she wants to do is run on the treadmill, so getting her to drink more has been a little difficult without trying to force her.”

“I fucking bet,” I growled as Scott drove us off. “Get her off the treadmill. I don’t want her to overheat, and I expect another entire bottle of water gone by the time we get back. We’re on our way now.” I hung up the phone, nearly crushing it in my hand as I turned to Scott. “When we get back, go through the security footage at the country estate and the yacht and see if anyone went into Jaden’s bags. Someone had to have put the bottle in there. I want to know who.”

The ten-minute drive back to the helicopter was annoying as fuck, the tension in my body pushing me far too close to the edge. After exchanging the car with the large team I had following us on land, we boarded the helicopter for another twenty-minute ride back to the yacht. Once Scott landed the helicopter on the landing pad, we split off. The site that I returned to on the second deck was not the one I expected to find at all.

Jaden was slowly spinning around on the stripper pole, wearing a tank top and tight barely-there shorts with light music playing in the background. Camaro lay on the ground by the couch while all my guards stood around



and watched Jaden like she was their goddamn entertainment. My vision went red.

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

Everyone except Jaden stopped and turned, panic marking their faces as I approached. Clive and Owen didn't seem as fazed, though, as they stood closest to Jaden, their eyes never leaving her as she seemed to completely ignore me and continued spinning, her legs stretched out in the air as she held herself against the pole, exposing that fucking bruised ass that was only mine to see.

“Why the fuck is she up there?” I pointed as I charged my way toward Clive and Owen.

“Because she looks like she's having herself a good time,” Jeremy said enthusiastically, leaning against the railing of the deck. I didn't even think, just pulled out my gun and shot him in the fucking head before turning back to Clive and Owen while Jeremy's body fell off the side of the yacht, splashing into the water. Suddenly, everyone went quiet except for Jaden who actually giggled and waved at Jeremy's now unoccupied space as she dangled upside down by her legs.

“Jaden, come down from there now!” I ordered.

She ignored me as if I didn't even exist.

I was going to rip that fucking pole down with my bare hands in about three seconds.

Considering our last interaction almost two hours ago, I couldn't really say I was surprised, but blown out of her mind or not, she should know better than to defy me.

“Sir,” Owen began calmly, “getting her off the treadmill was a serious issue. We tried restraining her then, but she beat the fuck out of Lewis's face, Max received a dislocated shoulder, and Wyatt has a busted knee. No one left that fight unscathed. It just wasn't worth the struggle anymore if she might end up getting hurt from her aggression.”

I blinked at him in disbelief.

“There are seven of you, and she's tiny.” Technically, there were six now, but that was beside the point.

Owen hesitated, obviously aware of how embarrassing that was, but looking around at all of them, their multiple various bruises and scrapes were unmistakable. I should be proud that Jaden was able to deliver that kind of damage, but it just annoyed me in this circumstance. They were her

guards, not her personal punching bags when she didn't want to listen to them.

"Well, we figured this was the safest option since it was the only place she would stay put long enough to remain entertained and drain some of her energy without overheating. She really enjoys the breeze up there, so that's been helping. We agreed to leave her be if she put on the shorts and drank the other bottle of water. And she complied, although she wasn't happy about keeping on the shorts. But we've stayed close by in case she falls. She's been fine."

His explanation didn't reduce my rage one fucking bit.

"What do you mean if she agreed to put on some shorts? What was she wearing before?"

Owen paled again, looking extremely uncomfortable. "Just a thong and a tank top, sir."

I watched Owen take a small step back as I felt my blood pressure shoot through the fucking roof. I hadn't been married more than a fucking week, and I was already going to kill my wife. Yet I still couldn't exactly blame her since she was high as a fucking kite, but that didn't mean I couldn't still be pissed about it. At least my men were smart enough to get her to cover herself.

"Where are the pills she took?"

Clive tossed me the small white bottle from where he stood near Jaden. Catching it, I turned it over in my hand, noticing it looked like a normal bottle of aspirin. Twisting the cap, I poured the pills into my palm, observing the little round tablets closely.

If you didn't know any better, you would have thought the indented line down the middle was just a signature of the brand, and it was, just not for aspirin. This type of pill was designed to look like prescription drugs and the line down the center was the dealer's calling card.

"These are Monty's," I declared out loud.

There was a collective round of muttered fucks. A good friend of Dominic's, James Monty manufactured the purest brand of ecstasy in Vegas, and his high-quality supply was worth fucking gold. The good news was I now knew exactly what was in Jaden's system. Monty didn't lace his drugs with anything, it was as pure as you could fucking get it, which was why everyone flocked to him for his stock.

"How did they end up in Jaden's bag?" Owen asked.

“I don’t know, but I’ve got a damn good idea,” I replied, my rage still sizzling in my veins. There was one person in my circle who frequented Monty’s supply of ecstasy, and one person who would be stupid enough to cross me.

Regina.

I dialed Scott, hoping he had already narrowed down some security footage from my office. If that were the case, I’d consider this an assassination attempt, and blood would spill. A lot of it. Matt was gonna catch so much fucking hell from me.

“Anything yet?” I asked.

“Not yet, just maids in and out so far,” Scott replied.

“Watch for Regina. These are Monty’s pills. I think it may have been her.”

“Will do.”

I hung up and turned back to address my still swinging wife. I had to hand it to her, she was impressive on that pole. She had enough physical strength to look like a damn professional as she manipulated her body around the pole, extending her legs and arms, engaging her core at challenging angles. But if she wanted to drain some energy, I had a much better idea for how she could do that in private.

“Jaden, sweetheart, please come down from there,” I said as nicely as I possibly could. If she was as high as I thought she was, then being the demanding asshole I normally was wouldn’t register as well with her this time.

She continued spinning all the way at the top, just barely out of reach, but slowed to look down at me, her eyes wide with still so much energy. “Aw, you said please,” she replied, her voice smooth and sweet. But still she continued her little routine.

*Fuck.*

She spun again, her legs lifting out in front of her, her toes pointed toward the sky, but the second she spread her legs into a wide V, I lost it. Before she could make another move, I hurled myself toward the pole, placing myself right between that perfect V, her hips right in front of my face.

“Everyone clear the fuck out,” I ordered, and within fifteen seconds of feet shuffling quickly, we were alone on the deck, Jaden holding her

position with impressive strength and curiosity on her beautifully freckled face.

Grabbing the top of her shorts and thong, I yanked the stretchy fabric down, around her ass and up to her knees before plunging my face straight into that perfect pussy of hers. Jaden gasped at the surprise, but it quickly turned into a moan as her hips jolted and then relaxed as my hands clenched her ass to support her.

Fuck, she tasted amazing as always. The sweetest aphrodisiac on the planet, and it was all fucking mine.

“Oh, my fucking God,” she moaned, clearly not giving a single fuck if the whole world heard her. Sex was amazing on ecstasy. It was like your nerve endings suddenly multiplied by the trillions, and each touch intensified as if struck by lightning. You were connected to your skin in a way you never thought possible, making the pleasure of sex an experience worth revisiting.

I could feel Jaden’s weight slip more and more into my hands, her grip on the pole loosening with each stroke of my tongue.

“Let go of the pole, Jaden,” I coaxed softly, though I didn’t think she needed much more motivation when I sucked her clit into my mouth. That was all I needed to break her laxing grip, drape her knees over my shoulders, and carry her to the nearest couch, all the while still keeping my tongue engaged with her clit.

Her hands went for my hair as she arched her back and spread her knees wider, giving me more access to that delicious slit between her legs. I rolled her clit back and forth, lapping viciously at every silky inch of her until she was coming all over my face.

Her hips bucked wildly, her mouth open wide as the sexiest moans left her throat, driving me fucking insane. I didn’t even wait for her to come down from her orgasm before I gripped her hips and flipped her over, pushing her neck down as her pussy was front and center where I wanted it. My cock was ready to rip through my own pants before I finally drove into her.

Fuck, she was liquid fire around me, that soft, wet heat coaxing me to drive deeper and deeper until I was fucking lost in her.

“Holy fuck! Ah!” Jaden shrieked as I came undone, fucking her like I owned her.

I slapped the side of her bruised ass, finding satisfaction in the red flare of her skin. "Watch your mouth," I warned.

I honestly wanted to beat her ass black and blue all over again for finding it acceptable to swing on that fucking stripper pole like that, but I couldn't really hold it against her since she was literally out of her goddamn mind right now. I'd have it removed first thing tomorrow morning.

"Darren, oh my God, this is really intense!"

"Deal with it. You are in so much fucking trouble right now."

If only she could see the smirk on my face. She had no fucking clue what was in store for her tonight. Good thing I didn't need much sleep as it was.

Gripping her hair, I pulled her back against me, my fingers going for her clit while I continued to fuck her from behind.

"Hold on to the couch," I ordered, and she didn't hesitate to comply. Keeping my hand tangled in her hair and one hand on her hip, I pressed myself deep, fucking her hard enough so that her voice would ring in my ears for the rest of the night. With my fingers moving back to her clit, it didn't take much longer before she was coming around my cock, her core squeezing me for everything I had until my own orgasm was barreling down my shaft.

"Fuck," I growled as I leaned myself over her against the couch. She was breathing heavily, her chest heaving up and down as her back made contact with my chest.

And just when I thought she might actually pass out, Jaden shoved against the couch, her movement causing me to move back just enough to give her the space she clearly wanted. She then turned around, and practically growled at me.

"Why did you stop?" she asked, her nose scrunching up in the cutest way.

"What?"

"I didn't tell you to stop."

And then she shoved herself at me so hard we both fell back onto the wood floor, Jaden not even noticing as she pulled the rest of her shorts off and speared herself onto my still hardened cock.

*Well fuck.*

Amused, I decided to lay there and let her fuck me for once, my hands holding her hips as she pumped herself up and down, her pussy still as wet

and tight as ever. She tilted her head back and allowed her hips to completely take over, each movement deliciously slow until her eyes finally opened, and she caught sight of the sky.

“Oh, my God, Darren, are you seeing this right now?” she said, her eyes never leaving the colors left behind by the setting sun. “Fuck, it’s so beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” I replied, jolting my hips up to regain her attention before ripping her tank top up and over her head, releasing those amazing tits of hers.

Jaden cried out but resumed rotating her hips around my cock with the direction of my hands. But before she could allow my fingertips to bruise her skin any further, she gripped my hands and quickly shifted forward, attempting to pin them at either side of my head while she picked up her pace. Chuckling inwardly, I let her have her little conquest, enjoying the rough way her pussy milked my cock while her perfect tits bounced in my face. Fuck, she was magnificent like this, so uninhibited and wild.

I allowed her to go for as long as she wanted until she had us both coming all over again. She sighed heavily as she rested her forehead against my shoulder, her weightless body draped over mine as she fought to catch her breath.

Three orgasms. That had to drain her enough to at least get her downstairs and into our bedroom. Holding her tightly against me so she couldn’t squirm away, I sat up, keeping my dick still lodged inside her and stood. Jaden only squirmed slightly before she realized we were moving.

“Hey, where are we going?” she asked as her arms pressed against the back of my shoulders so she could support herself.

“To our bedroom.”

“Why? The stars are gonna be out soon. I want to see them.”

“You can see the stars tomorrow. We’re going to be very busy tonight.”

And we were. For two more hours, we fucked on and off, Jaden’s insatiable drug-filled appetite was a fantastic change of pace until I finally found myself actually tiring for once. She didn’t even blink when I fucked her ass for the third time, her moans giving her away the entire time. Fucking little minx.

“Darren,” Jaden murmured, her eyes on the ceiling as she sipped on the bottle of water I’d given her.

“Hmm?” I muttered as I twirled her beautiful red locks between my fingers.

“Before we argued earlier, you told the guards to ‘find that boat.’ What did you do when you found it?”

I kept my face passive, internally loving the fact that Jaden already knew it wasn’t a question of *if* I found the boat, but *when*. But I wasn’t going to pretend to be something I wasn’t around her. She already knew damn well what happened when I found that boat.

“You already know the answer to that question.”

She sighed, almost as if she were disappointed in the answer that she already knew in her heart. “Have you ever thought about, I don’t know, not killing people for once?”

I snorted. There were so many times when I would often forget Jaden’s innocence and how she came from a life so different from what it was now. I’d successfully corrupted what I could in her, but there was still some light that I just couldn’t touch. And maybe I liked it that way.

“No, Jaden. That’s not exactly an option for me. There are reasons I’m in the position that I am, and it’s not from being soft.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Well ... do you think you could still remain in your same position without having to sell women anymore? Is that an option?”

Ah, the million-dollar question I’d been waiting for her to ask me. If I would give up the lucrative business of human trafficking for her if she asked me to. I’m actually a little surprised it took her this long to bring it up. Or maybe she just knew better than to ask such a stupid question. The drugs were making her brave again.

“Would I still be on top? Probably. Does that mean I’ll give up that side of my business? Absolutely not.”

Jaden had the audacity to look surprised. She jerked herself to a sitting position, her eyes wide with hurt and fire as she stared me down in that cute way she always does.

“Why the fuck not!” she practically yelled. “It’s the most horrid thing about you. I can handle the drugs and weapons, but people are entirely different. It’s not right. It’s not fair.”

I smacked the side of her ass before she had a chance to mouth off any more than she already was. “Careful what you say to me, little girl. You know damn well this is of no concern to you.”

“I’m your wife now, so yeah, actually, it is. And I absolutely hate it. I gave up my entire life for you! You can’t sacrifice a *portion* of yours for me?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose to relieve the tension growing behind my eyes as I tried to stifle the chuckle rumbling in the back of my throat. God, this was ridiculous.

“What part of ‘I’m a selfish man’ have you not been able to comprehend, Jaden? I’ve never pretended to be anything I’m not. I don’t care what you think of me or what I do. You’ll deal with it as you always have.”

Her glare of daggers was absolutely adorable. “Fuck you, Darren,” she growled and then began to move from the bed.

*Oh no, you don’t.*

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I hauled Jaden back onto the bed, her back slamming into the mattress as I pressed myself over her, straddling her hips with both my legs.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going, huh? You think you can talk all that shit to your husband and then walk away? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Darren, you’re crushing me,” she snarled through gritted teeth as she squirmed under me, her little hands pushing uselessly at my chest.

“Good. You should be used to it by now,” I growled and gripped her entire jaw to hold her still. “Clearly, my wife has been harboring some secret feelings about her husband’s flesh trade. Anything else you want to get off your chest?”

Jaden’s memory was going to be bits and pieces tomorrow morning, so I might as well grill the truth out of her while I still could. She doesn’t get to keep secrets from me anymore.

“Besides your fat ass?” She snickered. “You can’t expect me to ever be okay with it.”

“I don’t care if you’re okay with it or not. But you will embrace it.”

She tried to jerk her face away, forcing me to double down on my grip and make it hurt until she stilled again. “Sooner or later, sweetheart, you’re going to have to accept that all the luxuries I provide you with so that you can live a comfortable, privileged life are thanks to all those auctions you claim to hate. And I suggest you accept it sooner rather than later.”



“You know I never asked for this life!” she retorted as she jerked herself just enough so she could slip her arm up and knock my grip away from her jaw.

Moving quickly before she could get in anymore tricks, I gripped both her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head. I smirked, loving the little pulls she made as she struggled in my grip. Dominating her was so much damn fun.

“Are you sure? You had to have known you were gaining way too much of my attention when you were still just a slave at the warehouse.”

She scoffed. “There’s no way you could expect me to have predicted you would have become so obsessed you would have bought me instead of selling me off.”

“What did you think was going to happen? That I was just going to let you go after all the fun we were having?”

“I was only trying to prove I was more trouble than I was worth.”

I laughed, lowering my head to capture her lips in a rough kiss. “You’re worth all the trouble in the world, Jaden. I’d burn this whole fucking world to the ground if I had to just to keep you mine. Make no mistake, this is your life now. Even as it evolves with me, you will accept everything that comes your way whether you want to or not.”

“I’ve already been doing that,” she snapped.

“You’ve done very well. I will give you that. You continue to impress me every day, and you’ve made me a very happy man, Jaden. But there is one aspect you’ve been failing to warm up to, and I’m going to fix that. Very soon.”

“What are you talking about?” Her tone was sharp, meaning to be accusatory, but she couldn’t hide the fear behind that voice.

I gently tapped the tip of her nose with my finger. “You’ll see,” I drawled and dripped down to press my lips to hers.

Shifting my knees, I placed one between her thighs, getting her to open wide enough so I could slowly slip inside her again. I fucked her one last time for good measure and made sure she ate something before giving her a cool shower and finally put her to bed. As much as I wanted to stay curled up against her in that bed, I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I knew exactly who had put that bottle in her bag. It was well after midnight now, so Scott had better have a fucking answer for me.

After changing into some fresh clothes, I left Jaden to sleep off the rest of the X with the door open and two guards standing watch. I made my way to the security room that was just down the hall to find Scott clicking away one of the many computers lined up.

“Well?” I asked as I approached.

Scott sighed as he leaned back against his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Regina,” he confirmed with a nod.

Absolute fury swelled in my chest, the urge to crush Regina’s scrawny little neck in my hands so great I was fucking shaking. “Goddamn it,” I swore under my breath. “When?”

“Right after she was kicked out of the reception. She knew Jaden’s bags were already packed, and she slipped the bottle right into her makeup bag and practically ran from the room.”

“Show me.” I needed to see this stupidity with my own eyes.

Scott replayed the clip, and sure as fuck, there was Regina sneaking into our bedroom with the same bottle in her hand, unzipping Jaden’s suitcase to find her makeup bag, and slipping the bottle in. The rage I had been fighting returned in full force again.

“Fuck! Why didn’t anyone catch this?” I practically roared.

“Probably because they were a little busy with backyard cleanup and the reception.”

“Goddamn it.” I pulled out my phone and started to dial Matt. “Send the file to Matt,” I told Scott as I waited for him to pick up.

“Bored on your honeymoon already?” Matt asked as he answered the phone.

“Actually, I just got done fucking my wife out of her accidental ecstasy ingestion for the last five hours.”

He paused. “*Accidental* ecstasy ingestion?”

“Would you like to guess how she managed to get her hands on a drug like that while safely tucked away on my damn yacht?”

Matt hesitated for a second before he answered. “Don’t you dare fucking say it,” he warned, but he was obviously already in denial.

“Scott is sending you the video clip right now.”

It took a few seconds for the file to reach Matt before I could hear him fucking with his phone to watch the clip.

“Fuck! God-fucking-dammit! Stupid fucking meddlesome little bitch!” was all I heard on the other end of the phone. “I’ll take care of it,” Matt

replied when he came back on the phone.

“You’ve said that before. And look what’s already happened.” Matt was turning into a broken record already.

“She’ll face severe consequences for this. I swear it.”

“What are you going to do, huh? Lock her in her room? How effective.”

“Don’t patronize me, Darren. Regina will be dealt with.”

“You understand that the only reason Regina is still breathing right now is because of you and your fucking pact. There were ten 80 milligram pills in that bottle. If Jaden had decided to take two pills of what she thought was aspirin, she’d be dead, and you’d have an entire fucking war on your hands. You swore to me she wouldn’t be a problem, and then she almost kills my wife. If she were anybody else, she’d be in fucking pieces. Do you understand how fucking serious this is?”

I could hear Matt’s struggle to keep his cool over the phone, but he had to know how grave I was about this.

“Yes! Fuck! Look, I’ve got something in the works for her to get her out of both our hairs. I’m arranging a marriage between her and Lucio Ricci. She can be someone else’s fucking problem then, and my stupid promise can go fuck itself.”

The idea was actually intriguing.

Lucio Ricci was the heir to a large oil family in Naples, Italy. He’d be able to provide Regina with the lavish lifestyle she was used to, and it would get her the fuck out of this country. Lucio was as stupid as he was attractive, a functioning alcoholic, compulsive gambler, and incapable of loyalty to any relationship his entire life. Regina would be fucking miserable, and Matt’s promise would be transferred to Regina’s new husband. It was a win, win.

“Well, that’s a start. How the fuck did you sell that?”

“Lucio is the one who approached me, and the family already approves. They’re sick of her just as much as I am, and especially after this, I bet I have this settled by the end of the month.”

“Good. But that doesn’t settle the matter now. Regina doesn’t come anywhere near Jaden. If I see that bitch again, I can’t guarantee she’ll survive the encounter. Got it?”

Matt sighed. “Yeah, I got it. You guys will never see her again.”

“Good,” I said and hung up. I needed some fucking sleep before I had to deal with the next crisis of the day. “Get some sleep,” I said to Scott as I

headed for the door. “Tomorrow we’re in France.”  
And wouldn’t tomorrow be interesting.

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I woke up feeling like total fucking shit as if I had run several triathlons or something. My feet hurt, my arms and shoulders were sore, my abs somewhat uncomfortable, and there was a deep throb between my legs. Fuck, I didn't want to move. What the fuck happened yesterday?

I tried to piece the puzzled memory of yesterday together, coming up with flashes of faces, voices, sounds ... touch. Darren yelling at me. Oh fuck.

*Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck!*

The ecstasy! Flashes of the guards telling me I might have accidentally ingested it when I thought I was actually taking aspirin. How the fuck had that happened? How had those pills ended up in my bag? It had to have been deliberate. No way was that an accident. How many pills had been in that bottle? What if I'd accidentally overdosed and died? Fuck! Too many questions and too many blank spaces in my head. What had I said and done then? How much did Darren know?

I felt myself begin to tremble as I pulled the silk sheets up to my shoulders, cowering into my pillow at the idea of having to face him today. What if I said something revealing? Something I didn't mean? Shit!

"Jaden, are you awake?"

*Fuck! I'm not ready!*

Darren's voice was soft, his footsteps even yet hurried as I continued to bury my face in my pillow, trying to hide my tears.

"Hey," he said gently as he sat down on the bed beside me. His fingers moved to the hair shielding my face from him, carefully tucking the strands behind my ear. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

“I’m sorry,” was the only thing I could come up with.

“For what?”

“For yesterday. For whatever stupid act I probably did while drugged out of my mind.”

He chuckled. Actually chuckled. That didn’t settle my anxiety at all.

“What stupid act do you remember from yesterday?”

I tried hard to think back to what I could remember, bits and pieces of barely anything.

“I remember taking the pill. Then running? A struggle. Then swinging from something I think. Somewhere high. I think I remember hearing a gunshot. And then the soreness I’m feeling down there tells me we had a lot of sex.”

Darren nodded with that sexy knowing smile I loved and hated, the one that only antagonized the knots in my stomach.

“Yes, you had a lot of energy yesterday. You ran on the treadmill for about an hour. Beat the shit out of some of your guards when they tried to pull you off it. And then spun around on that stripper pole for a good half hour and refused to come down.”

I jolted in bed, my hands covering the gasp that escaped my mouth in absolute horror.

“I climbed the stripper pole?”

“Mhmm,” he said with a nod. “You were actually pretty good at it.”

“I didn’t try to take off my clothes, did I?”

Darren’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but the glare didn’t last. “Thankfully, no. Otherwise, I would have had to kill everyone on the yacht. But you did put on quite a show for my guards. Surprisingly, there was only one casualty last night.”

“Oh, my God,” I murmured as I buried my face into my pillow again. I could add another guard to my tally of manipulated kills via Darren. Except this one was actually accidental.

Darren pulled my shoulders up to lift my face out of the pillow and rested my head in his lap as he reclined against the headboard. His hand moved to run his fingers through my hair, and I felt myself instantly begin to calm. Fuck, I loved it when he did that.

“Did I do anything else?” I dared to ask. “Say anything else?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. That was the worst of it. Although I’ve never seen you so animated in bed before. You were a fucking

insatiable animal last night. Can't say I can complain about that."

"You're welcome?" I replied, unconcerned if I fucked his brains out. At least one good thing had come of last night.

"How are you feeling now?"

I shrugged. "I feel kind of depressed actually. Like I could spend the day crying if I wanted to."

"That's normal. Ecstasy causes a persistent increase of serotonin, which keeps your serotonin receptors active and your mood euphoric," he began. "But eventually, your serotonin neurons can't make the serotonin fast enough to replace the loss, so once the X leaves your body, less serotonin is released so fewer serotonin receptors are activated, which ultimately leads to your depression."

"You sound like a science professor," I mumbled.

"I know my drugs."

"Of course, you do."

Depressed as I was, I was content enough to just lay there for a while and let Darren play with my hair. These were the tender moments I wished I could have more of, moments when he was gentle, sincere, loving. I often wondered if he enjoyed these peaceful moments or if he just suffered through them for me.

"We've arrived at our next destination," he said, breaking the silence between us.

"Bienvenue en France," I whispered in French.

"On va baiser toute la nuit à Nice," Darren replied in perfect French, his voice much too seductive for that to have been anything but something dirty. But I ignored it and turned in his lap so I could face him.

"What about Nice?" That much I had caught.

He smiled at that and moved to push the hair that had fallen over my face out of the way. "Don't worry about it. I want you to just relax today. Get your workout in if you can, watch some comedies, take a swim, play with Camaro, whatever. Just take it easy today, and we'll explore Nice tomorrow, deal?"

"Deal."

"Good girl. All right, get up and get dressed. Your breakfast will be out on the upper deck."

"Okay, thanks," I said as I rose and moved toward the closet, hiding my wincing as I moved. But I remembered something as Darren headed for the

door.

“Darren,” I called gently, watching as he turned toward me. “Did you find out how that bottle ended up in my bag?”

Darren hesitated for a moment, his jaw clenching as his eyes displayed the regret I was looking for. “Regina,” he finally stated definitively. “Right after she was escorted from the reception.”

*What a fucking surprise.*

I kept my poker face on, not wanting to antagonize with the fact that I was right that she was a threat to me. Understanding dawned on me that Regina could have actually been trying to kill me, considering she had the right motivation. Was that an intentional attempt, or was she just hoping to fuck with me?

“What happens now?” I asked.

“You never see her again,” he replied darkly and left the room, ending the conversation.

I stood there, wondering what that meant. Would Regina be punished for what she did? Was that why I would never see her again? Or was she just being kept away from me? Would there be any consequences at all? Was Darren now pissed at Matt? The idea that Regina hated me that much for things that were beyond my control had me slipping back into that dark, depressive state, and I wasn’t going to let her do that to me again.

*Fuck her.*



The following morning, I was feeling better. After spending the whole day by myself, watching comedies, swimming in the pool, playing with Camaro, and exercising like Darren said I should, I was feeling more like myself again. That was, until I fell asleep on the couch and had another dream of my time with Darren in the basement, resulting in another panic attack.

Luckily, no one was there to witness it except Clive and Owen, and they were used to seeing that shit. At least they were nice enough to distract me through it until I was able to finally catch my breath. I knew Clive and Owen would report it to Darren, but it occurred so often that he didn't address it anymore. Per Sid, Darren would only be keeping track and would leave it to Sid to handle if they worsened. I noticed they would sometimes worsen when I was stressed, which wasn't exactly a rare occurrence, but I had to have hope that one day they'd regress over time.

Throughout the day, I drank a shit ton of water, peed every five minutes, and feasted on all my favorite foods while Darren went off to France without me for some meeting. I didn't mind this time. I had no interest in being seen by another person for the entire day. It was a miracle I was able to get up off the couch at all.

But when the sun rose the next day and Darren said we could explore Nice, I was not about to waste that opportunity again. After taking a small boat to a nearby marina and passing through customs, we walked along the Promenade des Anglais, admiring the pebbled shoreline of Baie des Anges while overlooking the topless sunbathing locals. Seeing the water from that end, looking out into the expansive shore of the Mediterranean, it was serene in a way that couldn't be explained.

Like Valencia, Nice was another gem in Europe. I found myself once again fascinated by the beautiful architecture of one of the most popular cities in France. The large extent of orange barrel clay tiled roofs added to the already warm colors of the timeless buildings of Old Nice. The city was awash with color, culture, and creativity spanning from centuries before, and I marveled in it all.

I was actually relieved to finally be on solid ground as we bustled through the busy ways of Place Masséna, appreciating the Fountain Du Soleil and the black and white checkered pattern of the square. Once again, I relied on Darren's hand to hold mine and guide me through the streets without running into anyone so I could soak up as much of the scenery as I could.

Darren's demeanor wasn't as memorable as it was in Valencia, probably because he was still brooding over my recent drug incident, but if I could reserve my rage for another time, so could he. Easier said than done, of course.

We were currently sitting in a private dining room of some fancy restaurant, featuring a fine white interior that included the tables, chairs, walls, and some of the decorative furnishings. It was a little eerie but interesting, and as I sipped on my wine for the night, I tried to slip into a calm, knowing we would be headed back to the yacht soon for the night. I was exhausted, and my body was ready to ditch the heels and tight black dress that had been provided for me to change into for dinner.

"You look tired," Darren commented as he pushed his finished plate to the side.

I nodded in agreement but didn't want to discourage anything. "I had a really good day, though."

He gave me a soft smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

Striking the match of opportunity, I gently reached across the table for Darren's hand, my fingers grazing his silver wedding ring, observing the intricate details of the engraved designs on it that I hadn't noticed before. I could feel him watching me like a hawk, that stare burning into me with intrigue as he let me study his ring. When I noticed the design looked familiar, I realized it resembled the same pattern of the Gaelic designs he had tattooed all the way up his left arm.

"Find something interesting?" Darren asked me.

I shook my head. "Just admiring the designs on your ring. I just now realized they match your ink."

Darren was silent for a moment before he spoke. "I don't have much time to reflect on my heritage, but I honor it where I can."

"Your father's heritage?" I doubted his mother's heritage was even considered.

Darren nodded. "My great-great-grandfather came to America from Stirling, Scotland. His surname was Davin until he changed it to Davis so that his family wouldn't be able to track him here."

*Okay, I'll take the bait.*

"What was he running from?"

"An arranged marriage," he answered on a laugh.

My eyes shot to his, my brows lifting in surprise at Darren's humor. Good to know he found the irony comical.

"Can't imagine why anyone would want to run from that," I added with a smirk, releasing Darren's hand. But as I retracted, he held me fast, catching my wrist in his hand, his thumb grazing along my skin.

"The irony isn't lost on me, Jaden. I once squashed a potential arranged marriage the moment my father put it on the table."

I didn't give him a chance to continue before I interrupted him. "To who?"

He gave me that little knowing smirk of his. "It doesn't matter. She was all wrong for me, and my father knew it."

"I'm honestly a little surprised he let you out of it. I would have thought that sort of rejection would mean consequences."

"Not when you're the one in the position of power," he answered. I eyed him carefully, hopeful I wasn't appearing bitter.

"How fortunate for you."

This conversation was starting to leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Attempting to pull my wrist away, Darren refused again, placing it in both his hands this time. Splaying my fingers out, he turned my hand over, his thumb grazing along the tattoo that displayed his name and claim of ownership. His hands were so much bigger than mine, over twice the size, and a million times stronger. They were capable of so many horrible, painful things, things that I would never be able to forget. So on the days they were gentle and pleasurable, I would show my gratefulness in return.

"Has being married to me really been so terrible?" he suddenly asked.

I felt my stomach shrivel up in panic. What had I done to make him think that?

“Hard to tell. It’s only been a few days,” I replied with a wink, hoping for a solid recovery.

“And these past few days, have you enjoyed them?”

I softened my look, my eyes finding his and searching for that connection. “Aside from the day before, very much. This is a side of things I don’t normally get to see. We don’t normally get to see. You can’t tell me you haven’t enjoyed it too.”

He only gave me a soft half smile then. “You know days like these are only temporary.”

That didn’t answer my question. Instead, it only made me look away as disappointment filled my chest. Of course, it was only temporary. I knew that. But it didn’t mean I couldn’t hope for it.

“They don’t have to be,” I murmured. Darren then released my hand and stood from his chair.

“Enjoy what you can, Jaden, but don’t let this honeymoon spoil your expectations. That would be a mistake.”

The mistake would be thinking he would ever be capable of learning to love something he wasn’t accustomed to. Darren was too damn stubborn to break away from the dark world he had so carefully constructed for himself. I couldn’t expect anything less.

Standing over me so tall, menacing, and devilishly handsome, he held out his hand for me to take with a look of finality on his face. Slipping my hand in his, I let him help me from my chair like a good husband should.

“I would never be so presumptuous,” I answered.

But the honeymoon wasn’t over yet. And I was just as stubborn as he was.

The following day, we explored more of France, spending half a day in Cannes enjoying the food, shopping, and scenery, and then the other half at The Méditerranoscope of Fort Sainte Marguerite Island, which was a small aquarium. The island also included Fort Royal, the historical prison fortress that was known for holding the famed Man in the Iron Mask in the 17th century. There were several theories as to whom the mysterious prisoner was, inspiring an array of fictional adaptations that stretched over the centuries until Hollywood finally got a hold of the story. I remembered watching the film *The Man in the Iron Mask* featuring Leonardo DiCaprio and finding the story fascinating, though completely fictional. Wouldn't it be something else to take one evil man and replace him with his good twin? What a concept.

I refused to allow yesterday's conversation to deter me from showing Darren a good time in public. I smiled often, showered him with affection, and openly reached for his hand without his prompt, leading him through the streets like a woman on a mission. He seemed to respond well, his teasing of me and my childlike mood a good sign. Though he stood out among the crowd with his size and dark demeanor, he was a pretty passable tourist.

The next day was spent in Monte Carlo, Monaco, where we walked the docks of some of the most prestigious yachts around the world. Apparently, Monaco hosted the largest auction for luxury yachts in the entire world, and considering all the yachts in the area, it showed. Of course, nothing held a candle to Darren's *Legion*. That thing was a floating luxury fortress/ battle station.

Once we had our fill of Monaco, we were off to the next destination along the coast. This time, Darren didn't bother hiding it since it was already pretty obvious. Countdown to Italy, baby.

It took a day and a half before we finally reached the port of our destination, and I was practically ready to jump the rails before the yacht finally docked in Fiumicino. Rome was about a thirty-five-minute drive from there, so I was eager to get our asses moving. Not to mention it was the perfect opportunity for me to act eager and cute to keep Darren's mood agreeable. He seemed to respond well to that behavior, so I fully intended to embrace it.

Three black SUVs were waiting for us at the port, and I didn't think I'd ever ushered Darren toward a car that fast before. Of course, he was amused with my struggles to get him to move faster and purposely dragged his feet like some kind of asshole.

"I swear to God, Darren, I will knock you out and leave you here if you don't move your ass!"

He chuckled as he held my hand, my arm straining as I tried to pull him with me to the car. Eventually, he stopped fighting me and just yanked me toward him instead. His head dipped down to graze his teeth along the juncture between my neck and shoulder.

"Settle down, we'll get there when we get there." He meant it as an order, but his tone was still playful.

"I'd rather get there now," I said with a groan as I watched the guards load the car with our suitcases.

"Keep it up, and I'll make sure Scott drives extra slow," he warned, that sexy glint in his eye as he gave me a mild swat on my ass.

I scoffed. "No need to torture him too."

I watched Camaro hop into the back seat of the SUV that would be driving behind us and wished I could be in the car with her. She didn't like being cramped up on the yacht all this time, so being in an even smaller vehicle wasn't much better, but at least it was only for a short while.

Once customs cleared us, we were finally on our way. The car ride to the hotel was amazing. I had a hard time keeping my grin to myself as I admired the buildings, monuments, and churches as we drove passed them. I was already listing all the places I wanted to see before we left: the Colosseum, Pantheon, Spanish Steps, Vatican City, Piazza Novana, and the list just went on.

When we finally arrived at the hotel, Hassler Roma, my eyes couldn't stay still for a minute. There was just so much to look at, so much to observe and take in, a completely different scenery than I had ever experienced before, and I couldn't wait to explore the city.

"Jaden, come on," Darren called, holding out his hand. I moved to take it, following him into the building while Camaro stepped in stride next to me.

As we walked through the spacious and elegant lobby, the other patrons scowled at Camaro as her paws clicked against the tiled floor. "Darren, are you sure Camaro is allowed in here?" I asked, my eyes scanning the room.

"For what I'm paying, she can use the damn chairs as her personal chew toys," he replied as we headed straight to the elevator.

When we eventually reached our room, I tried hard not to look too impressed, but the flagrant display of Darren's wealth during this entire trip was, quite frankly, disgusting. The huge suite had an impressive décor of Italian artistry yet was modern enough to fit Darren's personality. Bypassing the fancy gray furniture, I headed straight for the massive patio that I knew would lead out to the view I was dying to see.

And it was everything I was hoping for. From way up here, I could see nearly all of Rome, and it was absolutely breathtaking. Camaro jumped up to balance her front paws on the railing to get a glimpse of the view as well, my hands going down to tousle her ears as she barked at the traffic below.

Darren came up behind me, his hands on my hips to pull me back against his chest. "What do you think?" he asked.

I sighed in envy, wishing I could go and explore without any of my tethers or regulations. With the sun getting low, I knew it was close to dinnertime, but all I wanted to do was run around in the city like I had in France.

"I think I want to explore every inch of this city," I replied, my eyes wide with too much excitement.

"Good," he said, reaching around to kiss me on the cheek. "Tomorrow, we'll do all the exploring you want. Right now, it's time for dinner, and then I have some shit to take care of."

I whipped around to glare at him. "Wait, tomorrow? You're going to make me wait till tomorrow?"

Darren lifted a brow. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting your schedule or something?"

“Actually, yes. Camaro and I have a date in front of the Spanish Steps tonight.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m sure she won’t mind rescheduling.”

I shook my head. “Have you ever seen her mad? She literally eats people’s throats out. I’d hate to disappoint her.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to lock her up for tonight to avoid a massacre,” he replied and then left the patio.

“Oh, come on,” I complained, trailing after him. “You can literally see them from up here, and Camaro needs to go for a walk before nighttime anyway. I’ll go with Clive and Owen.”

“No, Jaden. My team needs to finish their security sweep before it’s safe for you to leave.”

I blew out an irritated breath as he headed for the door to allow Clive and Owen in. “Now be a good girl and stay put,” he said and walked out of the room.

I scowled at the closed door. I was going to make him pay for this first thing in the morning.

“Benched again, cupcake?” Clive snickered.

“Don’t make me stab you,” I threatened and headed back out to the patio.



“Darren, wake up.”

I stood five feet away from the bed, enough distance so that I was well outside of his reach and waited for Darren to wake. He was notorious for being a light sleeper, yet all my quiet shuffling hadn’t even disturbed him. Selective hearing much?

“Darren,” I called a little louder. “Come on, wake up.”

He just groaned into his pillow. Was he fucking with me right now?

Thinking quickly, I stepped over to my side of the bed, grabbed the sheets and ripped them off the bed. “Come on, sunshine! Get up! Let’s go for a run!”

I was wearing my tight running shorts and a sport tank top with a built-in bra, and my hair was already in a ponytail. Not to mention I was wide-awake. We were in Rome, for fuck’s sake, and I was ready to explore.

Darren jerked slightly, but his eyes finally cracked open as he scowled at me. I smiled back at him in triumph.

“What are you doing out of bed?”

I shook my head. “The question is, what are *you* still doing *in* bed?”

“What time is it?” he asked, his voice surprisingly clear after just waking up.

“Five a.m. Come on, let’s go!”

He glared at me before relaxing back into his position. “Get back into bed, crazy. I had a long night last night. We are not going for a run this early.”

*Bitch, you can bet we are.*

I crossed my arms over my chest. I would not be deterred so easily.

With as much authority as I could muster in my voice, I cleared my throat. “Darren, you better get your ass up right now or there will be consequences.”

He snorted. Fucking snorted.

*Dick.*

“Last warning,” I declared.

“Remember who you’re messing with, sweetheart. That’s your *only* warning.”

If messing with him meant it would get him out of bed, even if it meant to chase me down and punish me, then I would do it. At least it got him up. In the end, I’d still be the winner.

“All right,” I drawled casually, my voice light and airy, “but remember, *you brought this on yourself.*”

And before he could prepare, I grabbed several of the generous number of little throw pillows and began chucking them at his head. Only one hit its intended target before he was already rolling over and returning fire with my discarded missed ones.

I ducked quickly, rolling to my side for cover behind the couch, grasping two more pillows, one in each hand. I tossed both when I saw Darren’s head bob up from behind the bed.

And then there was silence. And silence was never good when he was around.

I crouched along the edge of the couch, my heart beating wildly as I hunted my prey, two more pillows at the ready. Keeping low, I crept around the end of the couch, my head raising above the armrest when a pillow suddenly came barreling into view. I managed to block it with the pillow in my hand, but the second one I hadn’t seen came down at the top of my head.

I quickly moved back to the safety of the couch, catching my breath while I waited for the inevitable. I continued backing away, my eyes scanning everything in front of me for movement, but there was absolutely nothing. And just when I thought about attacking again, I felt strong hands grip me from behind under my arms and haul me into the air.

I suppressed my shocked scream into a loud gasp as Darren carted me off back into bed, his entire body curling around me and locking my back against his chest, keeping me completely immobile. I struggled for a minute to figure out what I could and couldn’t move, what might give and might

not, but there really wasn't much to work with. Darren just sighed in satisfaction while he buried his nose into my ponytail.

"Did you really think that would work?" he rumbled, and then he squeezed me a little tighter than I preferred.

"What are you talking about? It did work," I croaked through gritted teeth. "You're up, aren't you?"

"Mmmm...I'm up but not awake. Maybe we'll try this again in another hour."

"Another hour! I'm not lying like this for another hour."

"Wanna bet?" he challenged, squeezing me even tighter.

I felt all the air leave my lungs, the pressure in my chest growing and growing with each barely-there breath. I tried not to think of the last time he did this to me and fractured my ribs; I knew he was only playing around this time, but that didn't make the experience any less unpleasant.

When he finally let up just enough, I took a deep breath and then moved my hands with what little space I could and pinched the outside of his arm near his bulging triceps.

"Ow," he groaned, but his jolt was enough for me to move quickly to get my upper body out from under his arms and twisting it away.

"Come on! Stop being lame!"

"Don't make me drug you again," he threatened as his arm reached over and dragged me back into his side. But now that my front was facing him, my hands had better access to something else I knew he couldn't say no to. And what a shock, he was already hard.

Maneuvering my hands, I lightly stroked my fingers along the length of his cock, tracing the thick veins that ran from head to base, teasing in the best way. After a few seconds, my hand became bolder and gripped his base to stroke all the way up to the head while the other gently cupped his balls. I smirked as the slight rumble from Darren's throat told me I was succeeding my goal.

"You're being a very bad girl, Jaden."

"Tell me to stop then," I answered, continuing my strokes with even more force.

If he would just roll over, I could blow him and get this done so much faster. We could be out of here in ten fucking minutes.

I could feel his chest rising in succession, his breathing becoming heavier as he debated internally about letting me have my way. It really

wasn't that difficult of a decision. He was just being stubborn. But ten seconds later, he was mine.

"Fuck it," he muttered in defeat and rolled over on to his back, his arms releasing me completely. I attacked him like a shark, my mouth going straight for the cock that was already begging for my tongue.

Licking the underside of his head, I pushed his cock all the way to the back of my throat and sucked as hard as I could. Deep throating him wasn't easy, but I liked to show him who was boss when it came to directing his pleasure. I made damn sure he knew how fucking good it could be if he would just lay there like a good little boy and let me work.

It only took a good minute before his hands were in my hair, gripping me tightly as my mouth waged war on his cock, my tongue taking no prisoners, and Darren only seemed too happy to surrender...until he realized what he was surrendering. With his balls in my hand, I could feel them shrinking, telling me he was close to coming, but Darren always had different plans.

"Oh no, you don't," he grumbled, pulling me off his dick by my hair and slamming me against the bed. He gripped my shorts and ripped them down my legs before tossing them to the floor. "You don't get to play this game with me and walk away unscathed." He then slammed into me, forcing a strained cry from my throat as he began pounding away at me with a ferocity I was unprepared for.

"Ah, fuck!" I shouted as he gripped my hips to lift me off the bed, drilling into me at an angle that felt even deeper than before.

"You're going to remember every inch of me when we go for that run. And then you can tell me if it was worth it."

Jesus, he was going to fucking break me in half if he didn't slow his roll.

My fingers dug into the sheets, gripping absolutely anything to give me some semblance of balance so I could feel like anything else besides a damn fuck puppet. My pussy spasmed with each hard thrust, my shallow breaths becoming harder and harder to quiet as I didn't want the entire hotel to hear what was going down right now.

And that was my first mistake. I should have known better because he didn't like it when I held back, especially when it came to my vocals in bed. Keeping in stride, Darren shifted off the bed to stand, pulling my body along with him and fucking impaled me like it was life or death.

I came before I was even ready, my screams echoing off the damn walls as the orgasm bordered on pain, Darren fucking me all the way through it. His release followed almost instantly after and finally granted me mercy from his brutal onslaught on my abused pussy. I could barely breathe when he eventually pulled himself from me and headed into the bathroom, the sound of a shower catching my attention.

*Ha.*

My body was completely wrecked, but Darren was up. I might have lost the battle, but I totally won the war. Small victories. I'd take them whenever I could, however I could. There was no shame in my game anymore.

I gently cleaned myself up with some tissue, fighting against the throbbing pain, then grabbed my shorts from the floor and made myself presentable. My ponytail was all types of fucked up as I slipped my Nikes on and readjusted my hair. It was only a few minutes later Darren came out in a black pair of running shorts and a black tank top with his phone to his ear.

"Thanks," he said, hanging up as he reached down to put on his shoes. "Camaro stays," he declared.

I whined. She really needed to get out for a while, and I was looking forward to having her out with me.

"None of that," Darren warned. "Camaro won't be able to keep up with what I have planned."

Ah, and there it was, the moment he would try to make me regret my choice to wake him. Bring it on then.

I lifted my leg backward to bring my foot over my head, stretching it as far as it would go, and then immediately regretted it as the stretch irritated my sore pussy. Fuck, this was going to be more difficult than I thought.

"Did you eat?" he asked me as he stood.

"An entire grapefruit and a small bowl of oatmeal."

He nodded. "Good. You're going to need the energy."

I almost rolled my eyes. "Well, then let's get to it."

*No regrets, no regrets, no regrets.*

I chanted to myself over and over as we jogged through the city, sweat dripping down my face, my lungs about to explode, my legs ready to fall off, and my pussy throbbing with pain. I was so fucking angry that Darren had to make this run hard to enjoy even as we ran past some of the most beautiful architecture I'd ever seen. But I refused to fall behind. I kept up with his incredible stride, forcing myself to breathe evenly, and having absolutely no idea where we were going as he led us through the city.

"Are we going somewhere or just in circles?" I asked, trying hard not to sound winded.

"Why? Tired already?" he asked with a smirk, that devious smile of his making me want to smack it right off his smug face.

"Nope, just curious," I replied, fighting back the wincing that came with every step.

Goddamn him. Darren never went anywhere without some kind of plan, so whatever the fuck it was, I hoped it happened relatively soon.

The sun hadn't even risen yet, but with the city lights and shadowed details, it was difficult not to give myself a break just to observe more of what was surrounding me. Even in my pain and exhaustion, I still found something to enjoy.

Darren, of course, wasn't even winded. With it being just the two of us, he seemed pretty relaxed and upbeat. And I hated him for it. I felt like I was ready to die, but at least I got to see some of Rome before I did. We ran down the Spanish Steps like I had wanted to and jogged along the River Tiber, past Castel Sant'Angelo and Rome's Supreme Court house, until we finally went for a path that steadily went uphill.

I began to pant in my head.

*Alright, fuck it. Let's do this.*

"Feeling okay there, tiger?" Darren asked me, his smug voice doing its job in irritating me.

"Just fine," I replied confidently with a smile.

"Good," he said and held out his hand for me.

Taking it, I breathed a silent sigh of relief as we walked up the hill until we reached a giant statue of a man on a horse surrounded by what looked like ancient warriors or something of the like.

A few cars waited at the top while other people stood off to the side, looking out into the distance. But the closer we got, I realized Clive and Owen were there, each holding out a small towel and a bottle of water.

I could have kissed them both.

"Thanks," I said politely as I took the bottle from Clive, cracked it open, and downed almost all of it in just a few seconds.

That earned me another smug look from Darren as he took less desperate sips from his bottle, watching me with all kinds of amusement.

I shrugged my shoulders and ignored him as I finished the rest of the water and handed it back to Clive.

"Where's Camaro?" I asked him.

"She's back at the hotel with the guards."

"Did someone take her for a walk?"

"Your dog is fine, Jaden," Darren interrupted.

"That's because I ask questions to make sure of it," I replied, wiping the sweat from the back of my neck with the towel. I was under the impression that if I didn't express that I gave a shit about something, no one else would. What incentive would they have?

Darren smirked and took my hand again. "Come on," he said, "I don't want you to miss this."

There was no need to ask what "this" was as Darren led me over to the edge of the pathway where some of the other couples were standing. My eyes lit up as I gazed down at a near panoramic scene of the entire city. My eyes stretched far over the expansive view, taking in every beautiful building that I could find, including the mountains lingering in the background. Fuck, it was beautiful. And just when I thought it couldn't get more perfect, the sun peaked over the horizon, spilling warm golden sunlight over the city and bathing the sky in pinks, oranges, and blues.

“Damn,” I whispered to myself.

“Nice, huh? I thought you might like it,” Darren said as he pulled me to his front to begin massaging my shoulders, my eyes still on the scene in front of me.

I moaned as his expert thumbs rolled away the tension in my shoulders, my muscles relaxing under his touch, and it suddenly became easier to breathe. I couldn’t imagine running back to the hotel anymore after this. And I hoped Darren was thinking the same thing.

“We don’t have to run back, do we?”

Darren chuckled as he pressed his thumbs into my shoulder blades. “So you are tired,” he stated.

I huffed out a breath. Okay, yes, fine, I was exhausted. So what? Jogging for a straight hour and a half with no breaks wasn’t exactly easy.

“I only wanted to go for a short jog, not a marathon.”

“And I wanted to stay in and sleep a little longer.”

I smirked. “Yeah well, that’s what you get for not letting me go out yesterday like I wanted to. We could have avoided this whole thing.”

I sounded like a brat, but I was hoping to come off as more of a playful brat.

Darren’s hands moved up to my neck and pressed deep into the back of my hairline where my head connected with my spine, making me shudder. Fuck, that felt good.

“Sounds like someone is becoming a spoiled brat already.”

“A spoiled brat that has to persuade and coerce you just for a little morning jog,” I countered.

With Darren’s wealth and all the shit he’s done to me? He had some fucking nerve calling me a spoiled brat.

“And after all that, I took you through the city and brought you here to this amazing view, and still you’re complaining.”

I furrowed my brows. Was he trying to pick a fight with me right now? His tone was light, but it still felt slightly combative.

“My admission of exhaustion is not a complaint. It’s just a fact. And the view is amazing so thank you for thinking of me.” I kept my tone light in an attempt to defuse whatever the fuck he was trying to engage here.

“Worth it?” he asked as the tips of his fingers trailed along my neck to the lining of my jaw, sending shivers up my spine.



He wanted to see if I regretted what it took to get him out here, if my actions were worth the consequences that usually followed. And that was when I remembered an age-old lesson he'd been trying to implement since the day I first came to him.

"There's no pleasure without pain, Darren. Isn't that your favorite motto?"

Even though I wasn't facing him, I could feel the smile spreading across his face.

*Aced it.*

Gripping my hair, he pulled my head to the side and back so that he had access to exactly what he wanted. "That's my fucking girl," he whispered and brought his lips down to mine.

Jaden was such a fast fucking learner it was almost irritating. She knew just the right words to say to neutralize my mood and had all the right moves to distract me; one fucking look from her and I couldn't remember what the fuck I had just been going on about. It annoyed me that as soon as she put her hot little mouth on my dick, I lost all sense of control. When it came to her, all manner of my predictability dissolved in a matter of seconds. It was maddening. And what was worse was that she fucking knew it too.

How the fuck had I let that happen?

*It was what you wanted, remember?*

Yes, it was, but I didn't expect she would be this damn good at it.

And it made me realize just how fucking dangerous she was suddenly becoming.

Some days, she could play me like a goddamn violin, and even when I knew she was manipulating me, I was only too happy to let her. It was a constant game we played back and forth, letting her pull those strings she wanted to pull, watching her run with them and not even caring how far she got. And then once she crossed the finish line with her winnings, I'd choke her with them.

And she'd take it like the goddamn champion she was.

Jaden gave me the conquest I needed every day without compromise. She'd bare it all and then throw it back in my face just so I could have the pleasure of doing it all over again.

She was, without doubt, near perfection.

But there was still that one little component missing. And it held the most value.

Trust.

No matter how deep her conditioning went, how hard she proved herself, how much she sacrificed, I didn't know if I could ever trust her. But trust was very difficult to earn in my world. My own father didn't fully trust my mother, even after she'd given him three sons. But who could blame him? She came from the outside world just as Jaden had. Granted, she assimilated far better than Jaden did in a much shorter period of time. Though to be fair, she chose this life.

I watched Jaden stare out the back window as Clive and Owen drove us back to the hotel. Her eyes glazed over the city as we drove by, her excitement at the smallest of things almost infectious. I liked seeing this side of her, liked seeing her happy and appreciating the things I provided her with.

This entire trip had been a very wide eye-opener to what things could be as Jaden showed me a side of her that I rarely saw, mostly by my own doing. Her laughter filled my chest with a warmth that was still foreign to me, an invader claiming territory I refused to surrender. Giving Jaden too much power over me would be a mistake I'd never recover from. Her ambition to conquer rivaled my own; she'd proven that in just under six months, considering she had me wrapped around her goddamn finger. And on the days I recognized it, I'd punish her for it. Because there was another side of me that I could always rely on that never forgot where my true pleasure came from, the side that reminded Jaden exactly who she belonged to.

It was incredible to hear her laugh, but goddamn if my heart didn't soar when I made her scream, when true terror watered in her fiery hazel eyes to create the perfect tears. Just watching them slide down her face gave me more satisfaction than she would ever know. My thumbs actually ached just to smear them into her beautiful porcelain skin, to wipe them away and make room for more to fall.

Jaden was a goddess of bliss no matter what side of the coin I flipped. The amazing part was that the coin never landed, just kept spinning on its side, so I was constantly getting the best of both worlds whenever I wanted them. But even with everything Jaden had given me, there was one thing I

couldn't help but notice was no longer present as it originally had been in the beginning.

Hatred.

She had somehow managed to curb it over the course of several months to the point where I didn't really notice it anymore. I still got the full force of her anger and rage when I purposely brought them out, but they now lacked the promise of retribution. The vengeful Jaden seemed to be gone ... or maybe just dormant. I could never know for sure with her. And that was why I would probably never be able to trust her.

Like Jaden had said, there was no pleasure without pain.

After we'd showered and eaten, I took Jaden back out to the front of the hotel for another surprise that was partly a treat for myself, and I could hardly contain my own excitement.

Parked outside was my 1965 Shelby Cobra 427 S/C. The loud purr of the engine rumbled through my chest as the car idled in front of the hotel. The candy apple red paint and white racing stripe down the middle caught the attention of just about anyone walking by, including Jaden, who was already trying hard enough to remain unimpressed, but failing miserably. It was a two-seater convertible with black leather interior and a silver roll hoop behind the driver's seat.

"Oh, damn," Jaden whispered under her breath. "Tell me that's an original."

I scoffed. As if I'd ever own a replica of anything. "Of course, it's an original. I had it flown in just for today."

Her mouth hung open a little, a scowl beginning to form. "You had a classic car that's worth well over a million dollars *flown to Italy* for a *day*?"

I narrowed my gaze at her.

"Yes, another disgusting display of my wealth. Now do you want to go for a ride, or should I just have it flown back?"

She pursed her lips and turned her eyes back to the car. I already knew she wasn't going to object. I was actually surprised she wasn't begging to drive yet.

"No, it's already here. No need to waste the fuel."

"All right, well then let's go."

I grabbed the passenger door and held it open for her to climb in. She gave me that typical little smirk of hers and took her seat, pulling in her skirt so I could close the door. Walking around to my side, I took my seat

and helped Jaden buckle the old-school seat belt across her lap before doing my own.

Gripping the shifter, I revved the engine for just a couple of seconds, putting another gorgeous smile on Jaden's face before shifting it in first and taking off down the road.

Fuck, I missed this car. I smiled to myself as childhood memories poured in from what felt like a lifetime ago. It used to be my dad's car. We would spend hours working on the engine, polishing the body, and enjoying the fuck out of every cruise we took together. I remembered the jealousy of Dan and Dom when I got to go out with dad, but they never put in the work like I did, so they stayed behind as a lesson for work ethic.

For the next four hours, I drove all over Rome, stopping where Jaden had requested to visit, watching her enjoy all the best things Rome had to offer. I'd been to Rome several times already, so getting to drive the Cobra around the city gave me a bit of a renewed experience, not to mention having Jaden here for the first time gave everything a new spin. She was just so easily fascinated, almost like a child, and it was fucking adorable. But considering I didn't let her out of the house very often, I'd imagined she'd take advantage as much as possible before we went back.

After leaving the Colosseum, I took us to a small café with a great view of the city and found us a quiet table in the back corner of the terrace. I leaned back in my chair and watched as Jaden gazed out over the city, sipping on a cup of coffee. No matter where we went, she just couldn't keep her eyes off the view ... and I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

"How long have you had that car?" she suddenly asked me. "I've never seen it until now."

"I keep it in a special storage facility away from home."

She nodded. "How long have you had it?"

"It was my dad's. So a very long time."

"Oh," she said, her demeanor changing a little. "So, it has some sentimental value then?"

"You could say that," I answered.

Jaden nodded again, thinking quietly to herself for a moment. "I don't think you ever told me how he died."

"Heart attack." She furrowed her brows a little. "Not the answer you were expecting?"

"Not really."

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know, poisoning, gunshot wound, stabbing, a car accident maybe?”

I chuckled. “Death tried all of those cards before, and my dad won every time. So he had to take the cheap way out.”

Jaden regarded me for a moment. “Does heart disease run in your family?”

I glared at her suspiciously. “No.”

“And you’re sure he wasn’t poisoned?”

“Absolutely.”

An autopsy was done, and the toxicology report showed nothing out of the ordinary. I never doubted the results for a second, considering I had been with my dad the entire day when it happened. There was nothing to suggest foul play.

“What was his name?” she asked me gently.

“Warren.”

She nodded, lowered her lids, and then sat back in her chair.

“Why the sudden interest?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It sounds like you were close to him, but you never really talk about him. Or your mom either. It’s not like his passing was that long ago.”

Damn, her memory deserved praise. He had only died a year before Jaden came into my life, and it had been nearly two years since then. Three years without him seemed like a lifetime ago, and that first year without him had been difficult to bear, but he’d handed down the reins years before then. I was only twenty-five when I finally took over, my dad only too happy to retire and let me pave my own way, approving all the success we had made since then. He died proud of his successor, and I would continue that until my dying day.

“I don’t need to,” I said. “They’re gone, and I accept that. We all have to move on at some point. I don’t know why this matters to you.”

She gave out a little huff of breath. “Maybe I’m just curious as to what your dad was like. You practically interrogated me about my dad a long time ago. Sorry if I’m interested in yours. If you don’t want to talk about it, then just forget it.”

I glared at her but decided to see where she would go with this. “What do you want to know?”

She shrugged. "Tell me a story about him. Something that would tell me exactly what kind of person he was. Something that stuck with you."

I rolled my eyes. "All right, Sid, calm down."

She snickered at me, and I snickered back. She wasn't going to like this story.

"When I was ten, I went with my dad to one of his casinos downtown. He had special interrogation rooms hidden in private areas, and I knew we were going there to torture a snitch."

Jaden's mouth turned to a hard line, and I almost smiled.

"When we got there, I watched my dad cut that snitch's fingers off one by one and then rip out his tongue. I remembered being so impressed by his technique and how he was able to keep the guy conscious the entire time. I wanted to be that good."

Jaden grimaced. "Was that your first time witnessing something like that?"

I shook my head. "I'd lost count by then."

She paled slightly, unable to hide those true reactions from me.

"But I also remember being really stupid at that age. My dad had to take an important call, so he stepped out for a minute. Since it was just me and the snitch, I decided I wanted to have a little fun too. He was clearly exhausted from all the torture, and he wasn't that imposing, so I released him, intent on having some target practice for a while. But as soon as I undid the restraints, he kicked me so hard in the chest I flew back against the ground, the wind completely knocked out of me. And he ended up escaping from the room."

"Did he get away?" Jaden asked.

I shook my head. "No, because my dad returned just in time to shoot him in the back as he ran down the hallway."

She nodded. "How much trouble did you get in?"

"He beat the absolute fuck out of me."

"Jesus," she whispered before clenching her jaw shut.

I didn't know why I was smiling, but the idea that she was concerned for me as a child had my chest warming. "He broke three of my ribs, dislocated my shoulder, and bruised my face so badly I couldn't see out of my left eye for three days from the swelling."

Jaden scowled at that, her adorable angry expression doing things to me it shouldn't.

“Why are you smiling at that?” she asked, her brows narrowed in anger.  
“Because your reaction is cute.”

She raised her brows. “You think I should praise what your father did? You were ten years old.”

I shrugged. “I learned a valuable lesson that day.”

Jaden’s shoulders tensed, her body gearing up to debate me as she tilted her head at me. “And what did your mother think of this?”

I smirked, knowing full well the can of worms she was trying to pry open, and I was about to make her regret it. “She refused to speak to him, so he refused to allow her to see me. They fought for days after that from what Dan remembers at that age.”

“You sound like you approve of what he did.” Her voice was cold now, laced with that dark venom she tried to hide from me when she was truly angry. Now I was intrigued.

“Of course, I do. I’m the man I am today because of it.”

She shook her head. “And that’s the kind of father you want to be? The kind who beats the shit out of his own children for screwing up situations they should never be in the first place?”

I couldn’t help but sneer at her. “Are you sure you want to have this conversation with me? Because I don’t think you’re going to like the outcome.”

I hadn’t brought up the prospect of starting a family with Jaden in over a year. I wanted her to learn to focus on me first before we brought a child into the picture. Jaden wasn’t even a mother yet, and here she was already spouting her parental protective instincts. She would be such a fierce mother when the time came.

Jaden sighed and relaxed back in her chair, her eyes washed with concern as she turned her head and stared out into the city. “No, Darren, the outcome is already disappointingly clear, thank you.”

I never understood why she would initiate certain conversations with me when she knew she wasn’t going to like what I had to say. I didn’t know if she was doing it for reassurance or if it was because she was looking for a new reason to hate me. Either way, she should know by now that I would always decide what was best for us and our children, and she would just have to accept that. There would be no other outcome.

The following day, I got to spend the morning and afternoon walking around Rome with Camaro, Clive, and Owen, and about ten guards dressed as tourists. Darren had some things he needed to take care of, and by some divine intervention, he decided to let me wander the city as long as I listened to my guards and didn't do anything that would disappoint him. It was hard to keep my face passive knowing it was the first time I was going out in public without him.

So, like the grateful, perfect little wife that I was, I thanked him the only way he expected, and when he left for the day, I spent the next hour soaking in a hot Epsom salt bath waiting for my body to recoup. My hips were bruised, my pussy throbbed, my muscles ached, and there was a large hickey on the side of my neck where Darren's mouth had left his mark for all to see. When I was finally able to climb out of the tub, I braided my hair to the side to cover the mark and let the rest of my hair fall down my front to my navel.

After finishing my breakfast on the terrace, I walked around the city with Camaro on a leash while Clive and Owen followed closely behind. I took all the time in the world as I walked the streets of Rome in my running shoes. It felt strange to be out in public without Darren, but I wasn't going to give him a reason not to trust me with something as big as this. I wanted to gain as much of his trust as I possibly could.

I didn't know why I bothered to ask him about his dad. Maybe I was hoping he would tell me a good story about him, and I was honestly surprised he hadn't tried to manipulate me with a nice father and son story to bring back happy memories. But no, he chose a cruel moment to share,



one that he seemed to approve of. It was disheartening, to say the least. He was going to be the type of father his dad was; another monster raising his babies to become little monsters just like him. And the cycle would repeat itself over and over until someone put a stop to it.

I was back to thinking dangerous thoughts again, thoughts I hadn't revisited in a long time. But this sudden marriage and then the honeymoon were a serious change of pace, and for some stupid reason, it had given me hope. I had succumbed to Darren for so long; my need for revenge at what he'd done to me and my life lay dormant deep inside, waiting for opportunity to come along and strike, but I was afraid to move. Because once I got the ball rolling, it was only a matter of time before he either found out and punished me for it, or all hell broke loose, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for either outcome.

Stopping at a fancy looking café for lunch in a secluded area, I sat down at a table just outside so Camaro could rest on the ground next to me. Her tongue hung outside of her mouth as she panted, her eyes scanning the crowd of people passing by. Clive and Owen took the empty table in front of me, their eyes constantly scanning the area while my tourist guards fanned out to blend in with the crowd. I thought the number of guards accompanying me was a bit excessive, but I knew it wasn't worth arguing over. I was just happy to be out and exploring instead of being cramped up in that hotel room all day until Darren returned.

I sipped on my coffee and munched on my pasta, enjoying the flavor as I sat back in my chair and breathed the air deeply. There were so many scents in the air, spices from food, flowers from the markets just blocks away, chlorine from the fountains nearby. It was perfect.

Rome was an amazing city. Everywhere you looked, a world of culture both ancient and modern surrounded you, engulfing you in a completely new reality. It was easy to forget all I had been through when I was immersed in so much beauty.

I took another sip of my coffee, setting the mug down when I heard the sound of a struggle behind me. I instantly turned to see a large man leaning over a woman as he pressed her into the brick wall behind them. He had his hands wrapped tightly around her upper arms; the grimace on her face indicating her obvious pain.

Narrowing my eyes, I could see she wore a short, tight black dress that barely covered her ass, high as fuck heels, heavy makeup, and her long

brown hair was tousled. She looked way too young for that look, barely even eighteen and barely even a hundred pounds. The man wore a nice black button-down and dark jeans, his black hair well groomed, no beard, definitely in his late twenties, six foot one, maybe two hundred pounds, and stood with a slouch.

*Look at you, sizing him up already.*

I couldn't tell what he was saying to her since it was in Italian, but I could see the fear in her eyes from all the way over here. She looked like she was pleading with him, speaking quickly while her shoulders shook against the brick wall at her back.

And then he reared back and smacked her hard across the face.

I felt myself jolt in my seat, a bursting rage beginning to burn in my gut as I watched the woman begin to cry.

What the fuck.

He then reached into the back of his pocket and held out a thin little booklet and hit her on the nose with it. It was a fucking passport.

She then quickly reached into her purse and pulled out a giant crumpled wad of cash, which she immediately handed to him. He stood back barely a step, pocketed the passport, and began to count the money.

*Motherfucker.*

He was her pimp. Or even worse, her fucking trafficker.

I grit my teeth, my jaw grinding away as my fingers wrapped around the back of my chair as I watched this fucking crime continue right in front of me. Traffickers were known to hold the passports of the victims they smuggled into other countries for sex trafficking to keep them under control. They keep it as ransom until the victims can pay off their new "smuggling fee" with their bodies. A classic trick for young women living in the poverty of poorer countries. They're promised a good life if they agree to go with the trafficker, but quickly find themselves trapped as a sex slave with no way out.

And here I was, fucking married to one.

"Turn around, Mrs. Davis," Clive's voice warned. "That doesn't concern you."

Rage like I hadn't known in a long time ripped through my chest like a damn volcano. I could fucking level that guy in a second if I wanted to. And I really fucking wanted to.

"Mrs. Davis," he warned again, his voice more deliberate this time.

I turned back around with a scowl, my eyes looking at the small crowd, hoping someone might step in and help, but so far, everyone just ignored them.

*Don't disappoint Darren. You need his trust.*

God fucking damnit.

I could hear him yelling at her again, but the reason was irrelevant. I only tried to ignore it for another five seconds when I heard him slam her back into the brick wall, the sound of another slap echoing in my ears.

My internal frustration was growing. I needed to maintain Darren's trust in me, but the knowledge of what was happening just a few yards away was quickly winning the battle.

I could help this girl. And I was never going to fully obtain Darren's trust anyway.

Picking up my coffee mug, I couldn't help but notice how small it was, how heavy it felt in my palm.

"Mrs. Davis, ignore it," Owen chided, a warning glare on his face.

"Mhmm," I mumbled with a nod, taking the last sip of my coffee, emptying it.

And then I heard him smack her again, her cry hitting my ears and sealing that fuck's fate.

*Fuck this.*

Gripping my mug, I quickly turned and chucked it at the guy's head. It smashed right into the side of his skull, shattering everywhere and stunning him into silence. I smiled as I watched him hit the ground like a ton of bricks, the woman stunned by my intervention. I gave her a wink and then turned back around in my seat, a satisfied smile on my face.

I was met by two very annoyed scowls, but I didn't give a shit. That fucker was lucky that was all I did. None of the passersby even looked in my direction, too distracted by their sightseeing, so I didn't know why they even cared that much. It wasn't like the guy was getting up any time soon.

Clive shook his head as he stood with Owen. "Come on, Mrs. Davis. Time to go."

I shrugged, uncaring. "Doesn't look like anyone else around here gives a shit, so I'm not sure why either of you do. I did her a favor."

"You know better than to draw attention to yourself," Owen chided.

I stood, Camaro rising to my side. "Funny, because not one single person is even looking at me right now."

“That you know of,” he added.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

We paid my bill and then walked around the unconscious asshole who was still lying on the ground, the cash in his hand gone and a passportless pocket, his victim long gone. I hoped with that money and her passport, she could buy a plane ticket and get the fuck out of Dodge. Even if it brought me trouble with Darren, at least I was able to help one person today. But I was too angry to feel any relief for what I did. There would probably be hell to pay.

*Fuck.*

Instead of walking back, Camaro and I rode in the back seat of a BMW back to the hotel, the entire ride silent. Darren still wasn't there when we got back to the room, so I put my headphones on to listen to some music and played with Camaro on the terrace to calm my nerves. I didn't know what Darren's evening plans were, but they usually involved dinner at some point. At least I hoped.

About an hour later, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand, causing me to tense. It wasn't two seconds after I suddenly felt myself yanked away from the card house I was building at the table and violently swung up into the air. My body quickly turned and instantly wrapped my legs around a thickly muscled torso to prevent myself from being swung around anymore. My back met the bed sharply, the air nearly knocked from my lungs when Darren's angry face finally came into view.

*For fuck's sakes.*

“What the fuck happened today, Jaden?” he roared down at me.

My guts instantly twisted to shambles, my blood rushing in every direction before my mouth finally figured out how to formulate words.

“Nothing happened today,” I answered, trying to keep my voice steady. “Everything went fine.”

He didn't look convinced.

“Fine? So you consider throwing a mug at some guy's head and knocking him out totally normal?”

“Are we going by your definition of normal? Because if so, then I don't even know why this is on your radar.”

“Don't be a smartass, Jaden. Everything about you is on my radar.”

“Then you should know that nothing came of the tossing of my mug, and that this reaction is completely unnecessary.”

He didn't even say anything, just hauled me up and threw me over his lap.

*Goddamn it. Not this shit again.*

My sundress was instantly flipped up to expose my bare ass, Darren not sparing me a second before he began bestowing blow after blow onto my unprepared flesh. He didn't even say anything, just kept going until I was finally crying silently underneath him, the pain so horrible I was ready to beg him to stop, which was exactly what he wanted to hear so he could deny me mercy and then continue.

Only when I finally screamed that I was sorry did he eventually stop.

I fucking sobbed with relief as my nails dug into the sheets while tears stormed down my face, my jaw aching from gritting my teeth too hard.

"What are you sorry for?" Darren asked me, his voice deadly calm. That was the tone of voice that scared me the most.

"Drawing attention to myself in public."

I didn't want to play games, downplay my offense, or beat around the bush with it. I wanted to get to the heart of the issue so I could get this done and over with. Now.

"Why is that against the rules?" he asked evenly.

"Because it's dangerous," I replied, my voice cracking as I tried to keep my shoulders from shaking. I was breathing so hard my lungs felt like they would burst from my chest.

"That's right," Darren said, his hand running smoothly over my searing ass.

"But I didn't draw attention to myself," I defended. "No one even noticed."

That earned me another hard swat, my voice fighting to turn my scream into a screeching groan as I tensed over his lap.

"That doesn't mean you risk it," he growled, his hand smoothing down my ass again.

"I just wanted to help her," I whispered, my voice dying with each breath I took. The familiar feeling of miserable defeat flooded my body, weighing me down like a ton of bricks.

"You're not a fucking hero, Jaden. You're my wife, and you will obey my fucking rules. No exceptions."

"I know," I murmured. "I couldn't help it." *It was one of my triggers, after all.*

“And look at what it cost you. Now I can’t trust you to go out in public alone without making a scene. And your ass will be bruised for the rest of the week because of it. You didn’t owe that woman shit, yet you felt the need to risk exposure for her. Not every risk is worth making sacrifices for, Jaden. You need to remember that.”

I sniffed back the fresh batch of tears that threatened to fall. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Darren sighed as he continued to massage the flesh of my ass, redistributing the heat where he pleased while I winced under him, grateful he was no longer hitting me.

A moment later, Darren lifted me from his lap and placed me on my feet to stand between his spread legs. He looked over my red tear drenched face, and I let him see it all—the defeat, the fear, and the submission he was looking for so he could bask in his victory over me. He had a point to make, and I wouldn’t deny him the triumph of that message. I knew where the line was, and I would not cross it again tonight.

Placing his hands along the sides of my face, he held my jaw in place while his thumbs gently wiped my tears away. When he finished, he placed his hands on my hips and drew me closer.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

Sucking in a shaky breath of recovery, I placed my hands on his meaty shoulders and leaned down to press my lips to his. He took full advantage, pulling me in tighter while his tongue completely dominated my mouth. Heat flooded my entire body as I kissed him, submitting to his motions without objection or defiance and accepting the reward for my beating.

“We have somewhere to be tonight,” he drawled as he released my mouth. “I want you to go get cleaned up and be ready in an hour. I’ll lay out something for you to wear.”

“Okay,” I answered and carefully turned away to head for the shower. My ass throbbed with each step as skepticism entered my mind. He usually fucked the shit out of me after a spanking like that, yet all he demanded was a kiss.

What the fuck did he have planned tonight?

When Scott pulled the short limo over in front of the casino, Clive and Owen stepping out first, followed by Mark, another one of the guards who sat up front with Scott. Stepping out, I held my hand out to assist Jaden from the car. Even in a slightly diminished state, she looked absolutely fuckable in the tight dark emerald green cocktail dress I laid out for her. There was a layer of black lace that covered the green fabric, giving it a dark look that suited the occasion. Her hair was pulled to one side in long glossy curls while her the color of her hazel eyes blazed through the smoky eye she'd done. I was a little impressed at how well she kept up with me in those six-inch strappy black heels I picked out, but I stopped caring after I noticed how fucking good they made her legs look.

Jaden was without a doubt the sexiest woman I'd ever laid eyes on. And she was all fucking mine.

I kept her hand in mine and led her through the doors of the casino while our little entourage followed. I decided to leave Camaro back at the hotel since tonight was probably going to end up being problematic, and I didn't need the dog making it worse.

Leading Jaden through the crowded lobby, she kept her head forward and her face passive, ignoring all the eyes that turned toward her as she moved. It made me want to shoot every single one of them in the face for even looking in her direction.

Stopping in front of the elevator, I pushed the button to take us down and stepped inside when the doors opened. Once everyone was inside and the doors closed, I pressed a code into the floor buttons and waited for the

elevator to take us down. Jaden narrowed her eyes but said nothing as we descended.

When the doors opened, I took her hand again and led her out into a dark hallway until we came to the well-guarded door I was looking for. The guards nodded silently as they opened the double doors for us. Everyone in this industry knew who the fuck I was. As the king stepping in amongst his disciples, I'd be welcomed with open arms.

As we entered the room, my eyes instantly scanned every corner for every face that was there. Some I recognized; some I didn't. The barroom was dark with no windows, and the air was a little smoky from the smokers at the bar. Black leather couches and chairs were set up here and there, facing a stage to the left of the room. There were several smaller VIP rooms toward the back that I already knew about.

At least forty men were here, including the armed guards that were posted around the room and about fifteen women either already accompanying someone or here for themselves. The men dressed in suits while the women wore barely-there cocktail dresses. It was fitting for the occasion.

I could already feel Jaden tensing beside me as I kept her practically glued to my hip. Her eyes were scanning the room in the same cautious fashion, only her poker face still wasn't that good. Her brows knitted together like they usually did when she didn't like what she was seeing, skepticism marring her beautiful face.

"You didn't tell me we were attending some kind of party," she said quietly.

I loved those little leading statements of hers, the ones that would require me to either deny or confirm her assertion with more information. I wasn't feeling that generous tonight.

"Come on," I said, leading her over to the bar. I ordered us both a glass of whisky, knowing Jaden was going to need a good stiff drink to get through the night. She didn't even wince when she sipped it. Maybe she knew she was going to need it too.

Things were certainly going to get interesting very shortly.

"Davis," someone spoke my name from behind me.

I turned to find Marcus Leoni, the man responsible for tonight's festivities, standing behind me wearing a wide grin on his face. He held his hand out, and I shook it with a warning grip.



His slick black wavy hair had fallen a little over his dark eyes as he released my hand and stepped back in his expensive Italian suit.

"I believe congratulations are in order!" he cheered with a smile, his Italian accent reflecting in his English. "So good of you to join us on your honeymoon. This must be the new missus?" he asked, pointing at Jaden, who was currently sizing him up the same way I did.

"Yes, my wife, Jaden," I said, turning and introducing her.

Marcus held out his hand to take Jaden's, shaking it gently in greeting, the most amount of contact I was willing to allow. "So good to meet you," he said, that crooked grin reappearing. "Tell me, how do you like Rome?"

"It's amazing," she answered as she retracted her hand, her guard still very clearly up. "I'm very fond of the architecture here."

"Yes, there is so much beauty in Rome. You can find it even in the shadows," Marcus said with a wink.

Movement in the back of the showroom made my eyes shift, landing on the last fucking person I wanted to see. Mario Ricci, Lucio Ricci's dipshit half-uncle.

*Great.*

Mario Ricci was a problem, always had been a problem, and always would be a problem.

Marcus turned to look in the direction I was looking at and quickly turned back around with a nervous smile.

I turned back to Marcus, unimpressed. "I didn't realize Mario Ricci was a guest you favored," I said, my tone dark with accusation, hoping Jaden would pick up on it.

"You don't have to worry about him tonight. Mario will be on his best behavior. There will not be a repeat of Rio," Marcus promised, his hands in the air as if that somehow smoothed the situation over.

It didn't.

Mario once tried to kill me during a spat at a high stakes poker party in Rio. He'd been losing all night and claimed I had been cheating somehow. I rolled my eyes at the memory of it. As if I needed to cheat to win at poker, for fuck's sake.

By the time he drew his gun, I'd already put two bullets in his legs from under the table. That was the end of it. But I knew Mario liked to hold a grudge. Luckily for him, he had enough of a brain to go back to Venice and fucking stay there. He'd better hope, for his sake, it continued that way.

“I certainly hope so, Marcus. We wouldn’t want to damage the night for any reason,” I warned.

“There will be nothing to worry about, I assure you. Have yourselves a drink on me, find a comfy seat, and enjoy the show. It will be starting momentarily,” Marcus said with a smile and excused himself into the crowd.

*You better run, you little fuck.*

“We’ve been here five minutes, and you’re already making threats. Maybe we should just sit this one out,” Jaden said as I eyed Mario from across the room. He was sitting in one of the chairs with a drink in one hand and his other on the ass of one of the waitresses.

“Come on,” I said, steering her toward the bar. I ordered us another whisky and watched Jaden down hers to drown out her obvious anxiety, which was why I let her.

Taking my glass, I led Jaden over to one of the chairs, sat down, and pulled her onto my lap, wrapping one arm securely around her waist and drawing her close.

“I can’t have my own chair?” she asked as she crossed her legs and hung them between mine, wincing slightly. She was probably still feeling the tenderness of her ass from earlier. Good.

“No.”

I took a sip of my drink before setting it down on the table beside me as the lights on the stage began to change color, and Marcus took to the floor, signaling the beginning of the auction.

“What’s happening?” Jaden whispered, her tone slick with caution.

“Shh.”

Marcus clapped for everyone’s attention. “Thank you all for coming!” he said enthusiastically while everyone moved to take their seats. “I’m sure you’ll all be very pleased with tonight’s festivities and selections. We have some new meat with us and some who are completely *untouched*.” Marcus gave the crowd a wink.

For some patrons, virgins were a high commodity and often sold for higher prices. He was certainly going to be making some money tonight.

“Let’s start with Abigail,” Marcus said, holding his hand out for a young girl to walk out on stage. With long dark hair reaching to the small of her back, she wobbled out in black stiletto heels that matched the black lacy lingerie she was wearing. Even with all the makeup she had on, I was

willing to bet she was still seventeen. And judging by how slowly she moved and how unfocused she looked, she was the fighting type. Otherwise, she wouldn't be so drugged out of her mind.

I smirked as my eyes landed on the ring of silver around her throat, wrists, and ankles, the same technology that circled Jaden's, minus all the diamonds. The idea had been mine since I needed something that could do the job, but I had Matt find someone who could manufacture it. It was done in a matter of days, and after how successful it was, I convinced Matt to get it out on the market. It turned out to be a very profitable endeavor, and the business was now a full-on enterprise.

"Five thousand," Marcus called from the stage.

Jaden physically tensed in my lap. "Darren, what the fuck?"

I gently rubbed her arm. "Just relax, Jaden. Enjoy the show."

"Right here!" someone from the crowd called, signaling his bid.

"Are they auctioning her off?" she asked, her tone less than enthused as she turned to me.

"Do I have seven thousand?" Marcus called, more bids going up.

"For the night," I said with a nod.

Marcus didn't sell his girls the way that I did. He only leased them out for the night, a much more common practice than what I did. It was one thing to own a person for a night; it was another to own them forever, an uncommon service I liked to provide. Of course, I had brothels in Vegas and California that operated almost the same way, had auctions hosted in the same way, others for much cheaper on an hourly basis. No matter how you sliced it, there was always money to be made in sex.

"Is this consensual?"

I almost snorted. "What do you think?"

"I don't want to be a part of this," Jaden clipped as she instantly moved to stand.

I wrapped my arm around her even tighter, warning her not to move again.

"I'm not giving you an option, Jaden. We're only here because of you. Welcome to your exposure therapy."

Horror burst from her eyes. "My what?"

"After your little intervention before our wedding, Sid and I have decided the only way we can break you of your PTSD is to expose you to the things you need to learn to accept as reality. Your little stunt earlier

today only further proves how much you obviously need this. Trafficking is what I do, Jaden. It's time to accept that."

Jaden's chest rose, her eyes bulging as she gasped in air as if she was about to actually scream. I quickly slapped my hand over her mouth, my fingers curling around her jaw and squeezing tight.

"If you scream in here, I swear to God when we leave, I will make you scream so much your vocal cords will never recover." She stopped struggling, but I couldn't ignore the heartbreak in her eyes. At that moment, I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. "I can't have you reacting the way you did at the estate or out in public. This is an exercise. If you can get through this, then you can overcome your PTSD. This is for your benefit. Learn from it."

Tears started to flow from her eyes, spilling over my hand, and onto the sleeve of my suit jacket. I hesitantly pulled my hand away from her mouth and gently rubbed both my thumbs across her face to wipe away her tears, careful not to smear her makeup.

"Please don't do this," she whispered, her beautiful hazel eyes begging me for the mercy that did not exist.

I picked up my drink. "Turn back around and try not to make a spectacle of yourself."

Stunned into silence, she eventually did as she was told, her eyes going back to the stage to watch the girl walk down the steps and into the lap of the man who won her. It wasn't maybe ten seconds later her head was bobbing between his knees.

The next girl who came out was another seventeen-year-old little Russian blonde named Alyona. The white lingerie she wore with a matching garter belt and stockings signaled her virgin status. She was not drugged, obviously too terrified to fight anyone. She went for fifteen thousand and was taken into a private room by the winner of her auction.

Jaden's eyes narrowed at the next girl who came out, a shorter redhead who was about twenty in black matching lingerie. Jaden's hand went to rub her collar as she watched the girl sluggishly eye the crowd.

"Is she ... is that ...?" Jaden started to ask, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Wearing the same collar as you? Yes."

"Jesus," she whispered under her breath. Jaden stared at her intently for a minute as the girl wobbled in her heels, leading to another tear that

slipped down her cheek. She was quick enough to wipe it away before I could. “What drugs do they have her on?”

*Nice distraction.*

“Probably whatever she was addicted to first,” I replied.

Substance abuse was a nice little gateway that led to the hands of human traffickers. It made them more compliant if they couldn’t get their next fix. Of course, it wasn’t exactly difficult to get just about anyone addicted to drugs. It was always about control, and drugs just made things easier even if only temporarily. The drugged-out ones never lived very long – a few years at most – so you were constantly in demand for new meat and a steady supply of drugs. It wasn’t my favorite method, but it was efficient for the most part.

After the redhead sold for twelve thousand, Jaden swiftly turned in my lap, straddling my thighs as her lips came down on mine, kissing me with a desperation that was easy to recognize. Her tongue swept into my mouth while her hands held my face, and as much as she was trying to either distract herself or me, my hands couldn’t help but capitalize on the moment. My one hand reached around to grab her ass while the other dipped between her legs to find her bare pussy completely dry.

I wasn’t exactly surprised. It’s not like I expected her to get off on the idea of human trafficking, especially since I knew how much she hated it.

But she needed to get the fuck over it. Now.

Releasing my lips, she moved along my jawline to my neck where she whispered in my ear. “If we don’t leave right now, I swear, I’m going to kill everyone in this room.”

I chuckled lightly, my hand gripping her ass tighter, creating a whimper from her lips as she grimaced. “Your threats are cute, but we’re not leaving until I say we are. Now unless you want me to fuck you over this chair right here in front of everyone, I suggest you turn back around and engage in your therapy like a good girl.”

“I don’t want to be a good girl,” she drawled, her teeth nipping my neck as her hands began to travel down my chest.

Fuck, if I didn’t stop her, I’d be too hard to function.

Gripping her wrists, I pulled them together to stop her from distracting me further, squeezing hard enough to make her gasp. “That’s enough. You’re not getting out of this. Turn around and pay attention, or I’ll do a lot more than just fuck you in front of everyone.”

Keeping her wrists pinned to her chest, I turned her around and held her tightly against me, holding her still so she would have no choice but to pay attention. And for the next thirty minutes, she did just that, watching each girl step out onto the stage, await their bids, and then make their way toward their buyer for the night. Her eyes traveled everywhere as if she was cataloging everything in front of her and taking mental notes. At least she was paying attention.

With each minute that passed by, Jaden's body became tenser and tenser, coiled so tightly I thought she might spontaneously combust in my lap. I could feel the anger radiating off her in hot waves, warning me that a Jaden-sized explosion was boiling to the surface, just waiting to be breached. And I could not wait to see it.

When the auction was finally finished, and the twelve girls were all officially sold for the night, I released Jaden's wrists and watched the blood travel back into her white knuckles from her clenched fists. Her beautiful face was solid stone, her eyes a little bloodshot, while her jaw remained clenched as she stared off in the distance, probably trying to ignore all the sex that was now currently going on around us.

"Jaden, look at me," I ordered.

She didn't move.

Annoyed, I took her jaw and moved her face so she had no choice but to look at me. "We're going to do this again. And we're going to keep doing it until this face that you're making right now is no longer the reaction you have."

I swore I saw hellfire rise in her eyes. "I did what you asked. Can we please go now?" she murmured through gritted teeth.

"Get up." Jaden moved off my lap faster than I anticipated and released a deep breath. I took her hand in mine and led her through the viewing room while Scott, Clive, and Owen filed in line behind us. "Have the car brought around," I told Scott as we made our way through the hallway.

When we stepped out of the building, the wind rushed through Jaden's hair and whipped it into her face, causing her to rip her hand from mine so she could contain it. The limo door opened, and I ushered her inside, sliding in next to her while Clive and Owen sat across from us with Scott behind the wheel.

As the car moved into traffic, Jaden stared intently out the window, but even as she ignored me, I couldn't disregard the intense heat and rage

emanating from her body. It filled the car as though it was a tangible steam that singed my very skin. The fuse had officially been lit. It was only a matter of time before she exploded.

I decided I would let her have her moment. It wasn't healthy to keep all that shit bottled up, and I wanted to be there for that glorious eruption.

We were only three minutes out from the underground hotel when about ten cop cars raced by us. I watched their pursuit as they turned the corner in the direction of the hotel.

*Motherfucker.*

Jaden was so stuck in her own thoughts she didn't even notice, or she just didn't react. I eyed Scott from the rearview mirror, and he gave me a small nod. He was already drawing the same conclusion.

*Fuck.* If Marcus was getting raided right now, that was a situation that needed dealing with. Now. Jaden's meltdown would have to wait.

When we arrived at our hotel, I pulled Jaden from the car and led her back up to our suite, nearly ripping the door off as I opened it.

"I have some shit to take care of. Do not leave this room," I said as she stopped in the middle of the room to turn and look at me, her eyes all fury.

"Take all. The time. You need," she said and turned away from me.

I ignored her attitude and shut the door behind me, turning to address Clive and Owen who stood in the hallway. "She's going to break a bunch of shit in there," I said, pointing toward the door. "Let her. As long as she doesn't hurt herself, no one goes in or out."

"Yes, sir," they both said and stood to block the door.

I walked down the hall to the next door to Scott's room, opening the door to find him ending a phone call.

"Well?"

"Police had a tip about the auction from some Americans they were working with. The whole place was raided, and Marcus was arrested, along with everyone else there. Luckily, their security was able to alert their tech team first, so they were able to wipe all their drives before they were seized, so we're good."

"What Americans?" I asked.

Scott shook his head. "I don't know, but it's being looked into."

I nodded. "I want that place torched ASAP."

He nodded in agreement. The good news was most of those girls there were so drugged out they would never be able to identify anyone, especially

with the dim lights, but I didn't want even a single hair from Jaden's head being left behind there.

Scott made one more phone call while I nursed a bottle of vodka. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah," I answered, setting the bottle down.

It was time to pay Marcus's brother a little visit.

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It started with my hands. That horrible twitch that pulsed through my fingers, reverberating in each of my knuckles until it traveled up my wrist, along my arms and north to my shoulders where the tension only grew worse. The tight cold metal that circled my ankles, wrists, and throat suddenly felt tighter than they ever had. I felt like I was suffocating. Like the cuffs were cutting off blood and airflow, and I fucking wanted them off.

I didn't know what compelled me to claw at my skin where each ring was, but I tore at the metal until my skin was raw and red, and I could see blood. I screamed with absolute hopelessness as I tugged at the collar around my throat with all my might, but I knew it wouldn't give. There was no use in any of this, and my loss of control was my final undoing.

Seeing those girls up there, seeing the small one with the red hair, God, it was like seeing myself, and the memory of my own auction came back to haunt me with a vengeance. They were so young, so vulnerable, and just as fucking helpless as I was. In all my life, I had never craved such a massacre like the one I wanted to start at that very moment. My very soul demanded an ocean of blood, and it was left deeply dissatisfied.

It was only a few minutes before my entire body shook with an uncontrollable white-hot rage that was ready to burst forth and destroy everything around me.

And it was the first time I fucking let it.

Grabbing the first thing nearest me, which happened to be a lamp, I rapidly ripped it from the dresser and tossed it across the room. It smashed against the wall before shattering to the floor, the large dent inviting me to do more.

The decorative items on the dresser were next as I violently shoved them across the hard wood and watched them clatter onto the carpet before the dresser followed suit, its ends turned up until it was upside down, the glass from the small doors in complete shatters.

I ripped at the soft throw pillows, fighting the fabric until the feathers littered the air and the rug around me. I lost track of the number of holes I kicked into the walls, drywall dust twinkling in the air as I moved through it like a madwoman. The couch was eventually turned onto its side while the wooden bindings were completely kicked in. The glass frames on the wall became target practice for anything small enough I could get my hands on. The bed sheets torn from the mattress into shreds, my nails destroying the fabric until I thought they would fall off.

By the time I finished, I could barely breathe. I huffed oxygen into my lungs like I was suffocating while the room I stood in was completely decimated. Utterly numb with rage and despair, I collapsed to the floor, joining the destruction around me like I belonged there, a ruined thing like everything else. I had no strength left to even move. All I could do was rest my head against the remains of the broken couch and curl in on myself.

White-hot tears seared their way down my cheeks as my heart nearly burst from my chest, my voice unrecognizable as I screamed in fury. My anguish didn't just stem from the rage and utter hopelessness. What I was suffering was the all-consuming bitter taste of *betrayal*.

In an instant, I became viciously unraveled. The closely bound stitching that I had used to sew myself into the perfection that I had become was swiftly ripped away, releasing a violent monster of emotional depravity. The sledgehammer of trauma had crashed through the carefully laid concrete that swallowed my heart, and all I felt was the desolation of unimaginable heartbreak. All of Darren's carefully crafted work was completely undone in a single evening.

After everything I had done, after everything I had given him, *given up* for him, this was my reward. This was the future I got to look forward to. Watching innocent women get raped right in front of me while I had to pretend it was okay. Benefiting from their suffering by means of pretty dresses, beautiful homes, and fancy vacations. Living my life so they could continue to lose more of theirs.

I felt utterly disgusted with myself, so much so I wanted nothing more than to scald my own skin off. It was the least I deserved.

I had no idea what time it was, but it was probably hours later before Darren finally returned. I'd fallen asleep in my crumpled state on the floor, but Darren's presence always had my body on guard, forcing me to wake to find him looming in my peripherals. He stood by the door, his hands casually placed in his pockets as his eyes assessed the room until they finally landed on me. He didn't even look surprised.

Quietly moving through the rubble of the room, he stood over me, his towering and massively intimidating figure doing nothing but pissing me off even more than I already was. And then he hunched down to my eye level.

"Well, this is one hell of a tantrum, Jaden. But not as impressive as I was expecting."

I scoffed. "You expected worse?" I murmured without looking at him. At least he thought I was justified in my destruction.

"I honestly expected you to burn down the hotel."

*I fucking should have.*

I shook my head. Interesting how he found this funny. "Sorry, no Molotov cocktails today."

"Well, that's a shame," he drawled, reaching forward to tuck a string of loose hair from my face behind my ear. "I was hoping you would have saved some of that rage for me."

Darren then reached forward and lifted me from the ground, cradling me to his chest tightly and walking us over to the disheveled mess of a bed. Dropping me onto the mattress, he covered my body with his, the heat coming off his skin nearly suffocating me, but I refused to react. He wouldn't be getting shit from me tonight.

When I refused to look at him, he slapped me across the face hard enough to turn my head to the other side. When all I did was frown in confusion, he slapped me again, both sides of my face now hot and inflamed with pain. He was trying to rile me up again, trying to poke the beast so he could finally have his favorite playmate again.

He pulled his arm back to slap me again, but this time, my hand shot up to grab his wrist when it came down, stopping it in its place and glared at him.

"Jealous the room got more attention than you? Is that it?"

"Extremely," he replied, the fire in his eyes growing now that he finally had my attention.

“Jesus, you have issues. You should really have Sid diagnose them.”

Darren’s eyes sparkled with intrigue. “He has. You should see his medical file on me. He finds me fascinating.”

Darren wrapped his meaty palm around my wrist and pinned it to the mattress, allowing him to move in to trace his lips along my neck and sending sweet little shivers down my spine.

“Let me guess, a high functioning psychopath with mommy issues,” I said through gritted teeth as the fury began to simmer in my chest again.

He chuckled as he ran his tongue along the edge of my collarbone before he reared back to grip my jaw in his hand, jerking me to the side so he could breathe into my ear.

“A psychopath is mild compared to what I am.”

Pushing himself back, he roughly nudged my legs apart with his hips to place himself between them, the sound of his zipper echoing in my ears, but as the rage continued to boil in my blood, I suddenly realized I was in no mood to be submissive tonight.

Nah, fuck that.

Tonight ... we were both going to bleed.

Tucking my knees, I quickly pressed the heels of my feet into Darren’s hips and kicked as hard as I could. He went back several feet, giving me the opportunity I needed to somersault backward over the bed and land on my feet on the other side.

“I’m really not in the fucking mood for your shit tonight,” I growled.

He just sneered at me, that familiar look of lust and hunger all mixed up to create a very dangerous cocktail. I hated that I was essentially giving him exactly what he wanted, but maybe I needed this too. Maybe I needed to do a little conquering for once.

“By the looks of it, I’d say you’re in the perfect fucking mood,” he replied smoothly. “And I’m going to enjoy it while it lasts.”

I turned and grabbed the first thing nearest to me that wasn’t yet smashed to bits and hauled back. “Yeah, enjoy this,” I said and chucked it at him. The object turned out to be a fancy paperweight that narrowly missed him as he quickly turned to the side to dodge it.

I didn’t give him much chance of recovery as I began hurling whatever was within reach in his general direction. Broken pieces of furniture or glass flew at him like a whirlwind, some catching him until he suddenly ducked down. The next thing I knew, the entire canopy bedframe was being

lifted on one side and completely turned over in my direction, the floor shaking as it hit the ground.

Abandoning my airborne attacks, I shuffled back with just enough time to escape as Darren leaped around the bed after me. I grabbed a small chair and whipped it at him, the wood splintering as his massive bulky arm came up as a protective shield before he was able to rip it out of my hands.

Catching my wrist, he tried to pull me toward him, but I lifted my leg to roundhouse kick him in the side. He took the hit, grimacing only slightly before backhanding me across the face and flinging me across the room. I crashed over the broken couch, rolling across the cushions and landing in a heap on the torn pillow and goose feathered ground.

Angry steps pounded away in my direction, and the second I felt him lean down to close in behind me, I reared back with my elbow, landing a hard strike at his mouth. He grunted as his teeth cut into my skin, and I took the moment of hesitation to turn and punch him right in the jaw with my left hand.

Pain burst throughout my entire hand as it connected with his face, but I welcomed it, especially knowing that the expensive diamond ring he gave me cut right into the side of his face. I smiled as blood dripped down the stubble of his jaw. The corner of Darren's lip was also already beginning to swell as it gushed with blood. A nice split in his lip would be there to remind him in the morning that I could still make his "indestructible" ass bleed.

But his recovery was still faster than I expected as his hand shot out to pin my throat against the broken arm of the couch. A wide smile then cracked across his face as he began to laugh in obvious enjoyment.

"Goddamn, I missed this," he practically glowed with excitement.

I groaned against his grip. "Missed what? My absolute hatred for you?"

"Fuck yes," he gritted. "You're so much more alive when you hate me. I fucking love it."

I gripped the fingers that held me down and tried to bend them back as far as I could, but Darren just took my hand and pinned it in place. "What the fuck is wrong with you!" I shouted at him as I squirmed to get out from under him. "You want me to hate you? Is that it? Is that why you did this tonight?"

"I've told you before, Jaden," he said, his voice deepening to a level that struck fear into my heart. "I want everything from you. Your love, your

hatred, your affection, your punishments, your happiness, and your suffering. I want every true emotion you've got because it proves to me that you're still not yet broken. You're still here, and you're still mine."

I shifted again to dislodge him, but he wasn't budging.

"You're fucking impossible! Even *you* don't even understand what the fuck you want! Everything? What crazed logic are you on? That doesn't make any sense!"

"Doesn't it, though? There's nothing else like you in my life. You just won't stay dead, Jaden. And in my world, when I kill something, it sure as fuck isn't getting back up. But you? You just laugh in my face and wish me better luck next time. It's the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen."

Now I was the one laughing. This was fucking absurd.

"You're so fucking crazy."

He smiled at me, that stunning shark grin that made my stomach shrink, but this time, it reached his eyes.

"Crazy about you, I'm afraid. You're in too deep now because there isn't just one thing I want. It's everything. You're the Rubik's Cube I never want to solve, Jaden. I want to twist and turn you in any which way I can because I love what it looks like when I do. And then I want to start all over again."

I grimaced. "How typical of you to compare me to a fucking toy."

"How typical of you to deny it."

"Mmmm," I moaned. "Right. Because I'm whatever the fuck you want me to be."

"And you've always known that. One day you're my wife, the next my plaything, to a crime lord queen, and back to the mother of my children."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," I muttered, trying to keep my heart rate even.

His eyes narrowed, the pressure at my throat slightly increasing. "You exist for me and only me, or have you forgotten that already?"

I would have chuckled if I could. "There is no greater purpose," I murmured sarcastically.

He didn't like that very much.

Releasing my throat, he looped his fingers under my collar and lifted me toward him, that dark menacing expression on his face making my stomach squirm.

“Careful, little wife, we all know how important purpose is to me. Mocking the pedestal I’ve placed you on is no way to appreciate your position.”

I groaned from the strain on my neck. “Sorry, next time I’ll be sure to bend over it the way you want me to. I’m sure that’s a position you can appreciate.”

He smirked and shook his head. “Jesus, you are a feisty little shit tonight, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “I am exactly what you created, Darren. If you don’t like the results, change your methods.”

“Who said I didn’t like the results?”

I tilted my head as I stared him down, unamused. Always games with this one.

His eyes moved from mine to travel down to my neck, his focus intensely trained on the red ring of claw marks that marred my throat near my collar. His thumb grazed the tender skin, but I didn’t react.

“This result, however, I am incredibly pissed about. What the fuck were you trying to do, Jaden?”

“I want them all off.”

“And that matters to me, why?”

And just like that, my blood just went from boiling to near volcanic eruption.

“Because if how I feel doesn’t start to matter to you right now, I’m going to go from feisty little shit to complete fucking psycho in about three seconds, you absolute arrogant fuck.”

And of course, the biggest fucking smile he could possibly possess cracked across his face.

“There it is,” he said, his voice dark and smooth.

I didn’t even think about it, just reared back and headbutted him right in the nose. He fell back instantly, but as he did, I rushed him, forcing his back to the floor while I straddled him and held up my hands.

“*There it is,*” I sneered and moved to strike his perfectly smug, handsome face.

He caught my wrist just inches from his nose and moved so fast to roll us, I barely had time to gasp before my back hit the floor. The broken shards of glass and wood splinters scattered over the floor bit into my bare arms and shoulders as my wrists were pinned down above my head. It

wasn't a few seconds later that my legs were shoved apart, and Darren's cock was suddenly filing me completely.

"There it *fucking* is," he groaned as he thrust forward, the hardness of him eliciting the exact response my body was trained to provide, and there was no hesitation.

I moaned at the rough intrusion, incapable of anything else as he took his sweet time plundering away inside me while I struggled underneath him. Lifting my ass with his free hand, he pulled my legs up to wrap around his torso so he could bring himself deeper inside me. I couldn't help but arch my back to provide the angle I wanted, and he capitalized the fuck out of it. His fingers then gripped my collar again and lifted just enough to cause strain.

"This is never coming off, Jaden. It was fucking made for you. Learn to be proud of it."

I bit down on my swollen bottom lip as his free hand released my collar and moved down my chest, that massive calloused hand gripping my aching breasts and giving them the attention I hated to want. Dissatisfied with the fabric covering them, he released my wrists to grip the offending neckline and ripped it right down the middle until my breasts spilled free of their confines. Darren groaned in satisfaction as he palmed each one, his large warm hands kneading them while his thumbs flicked at my nipples, sending little jolts of pleasure right to my clit.

"The same way it was made for them?" I finally countered, wincing as the glass beneath me still dug into my shoulders as he fucked me. I could feel blood begin to drip down my skin, but it was inconsequential to what was going on between my legs as euphoria quickly began to blossom in the chaos around me.

"What's the matter, Jaden? Not a fan of sharing what's yours either?" He leaned forward to run his thumb along the cold metal that circled my throat. "Did your collar suddenly lose its specialness now that you know you're not the only one with it anymore? Or is it because you're suddenly too good for it now since they wear it? Is that it? You're better than them now?"

"Don't you fucking twist my words like that!" I shouted at him, trying to ignore the building orgasm inside me. "I want it off for the same reasons they do!"



“You tried to claw it off because, deep down, you feel like the same damn slave that they are. And that pissed you off. See? I am paying attention to how you feel.”

“I’ve wanted it off *long* before I ever saw them,” I growled. “They just reminded me why I *should* still want it off. Because I *am* no better than them.”

A dark, sinister smile spread across his face, reminding me of that evil look that haunted my days in the basement.

“No, Jaden, it’s because no one, including yourself, wants to see a queen in chains.” He bent low, his teeth grazing along the lobe of my ear while his cock continued those long, slow, torturous thrusts, sending the rest of my body into a complete frenzy. “Except for me.”

He then pulled back and flipped me onto my hands and knees, forcing my head down onto the floor where the glass had cleared. With my ass high in the air, he speared back into my pussy, rocking back and forth with a rhythm that was both punishing and pleasurable, and all I could do was lay there and take it.

Without missing a beat, Darren gripped the back of my dress that stopped just above my ass and continued his assault on the fabric, ripping the entire thing off me and allowing it to act like some kind of rug beneath me.

It was only when I heard him fumble with his belt that my body locked onto a new sense of dread.

From the corner of my eye, I could only see him fold the belt in his hand and rear back. The sting of that first lash against my bare shoulder had me gasping for breath. The second one connected with my ass, creating a line of fire that had me screaming internally. The third landed right along my spine, finally eliciting the cry that Darren was looking for.

“Fuck! Why?” I shrieked, his cock and fist relentless in their pursuit of my body.

Darren half chuckled. “Why? I don’t know, all the backtalk you just did, striking me, the damage to the room? Did you think those were all freebies?”

I screeched as another lash landed on my lower back that traveled over the top of my ass.

“Or just maybe ... it’s because I fucking like to.”

I lost track of the number of strikes he laid down over my back and ass, but by the time he was done, my voice was hoarse, my skin was on fire, and my pussy was begging to come.

Thankfully, this was the kind of burn I had learned to like.

Dropping the belt to the floor, Darren reached down to grip my hair in his fist, pulling back tightly so that my neck was bent awkwardly.

“Who do you belong to, Jaden?” he asked, his voice dark with lust.

I groaned in obvious aggravation.

*Fuck.* “You,” I growled.

“That’s my good girl. Now come.”

Biting down hard on my lip, I fucking came as he suddenly increased his force and finally sent me over the edge. He drove deep, targeting that sweet spot of mine that had me quivering in seconds. A deep groan escaped his throat as I felt him completely empty himself inside me, my pussy still contracting with each pulse of him.

When he was finished, he released my hair, and I fell forward against the shreds of my dress beneath me like a goddamn puddle of nothing. All my energy and rage were finally dispelled, leaving behind a void of a girl with fresh cum dripping down the side of her leg. I closed my eyes, sucking in heavy breaths as I gladly laid there on the floor, surrounded by all the glass and devastation of that room.

And just like that, my soul matched the interior of that beautiful honeymoon suite.

I came back from the bathroom to find Jaden completely passed out on the floor, surrounded by the remnants of her latest tantrum. Fuck, she had been amazing. All wild and uncontrollable, unchallenged and fierce, like the feral animal I’d always known her to be.

No one made me feel more alive the way that she did.

After righting the bedframe I had turned over, I fixed the mattress and the sheets, laying out whatever pillows I could salvage from the floor. Scooping Jaden into my arms, I gently carried her over to the bed, her sleeping form barely making a sound as I set her down on her stomach. After carefully examining her wounds, I retrieved a first-aid kit and a warm, wet washcloth from the bathroom. Thankfully, the cuts from the glass weren’t very deep, comparable to deep animal scratches more than anything. They wouldn’t scar.

Once her wounds were clean and dressed, I rubbed some lotion into her back, neck, and wrists that would soothe her skin and wiped most of the ruined makeup off her red and puffy face. Even managed to brush her hair. She didn't stir once.

I'd fucked my little doll of a wife into a coma.

Leaving Jaden to sleep for a moment, I took a quick shower, washing away all the blood and dirt from our fighting and assessed my own injuries in the mirror. Pride swelled in my chest as I looked myself over. That little girl was capable of some serious damage if you weren't careful.

Jaden had gotten me good with that surprise headbutt; bruising in the corner of my eyes was already beginning to appear. My bottom lip was swollen with a slight split, and the cut to my jaw from Jaden's engagement ring was actually pretty deep, deep enough that it might actually scar.

I hoped it did. Then I could smile in the mirror every time I saw it and be reminded of the ferocious little animal that was my wife.

Compelled by my exhaustion, I returned to the bed and pulled Jaden between my legs to lay her head in the middle of my chest, the slight weight of her tiny body bringing me to the peace I fucking needed. I ran my fingers through the long silk that was her hair and breathed deep, finding so much satisfaction in the smallest of things.

My wife, fast asleep in my arms, safe, sound, quiet, and freshly and thoroughly fucked.

Fuck, tonight was everything I didn't even know I needed. The wake-up call I didn't know I wanted Jaden to answer. Things felt like they would be different now, but they were a good different. I never even realized how sick I was of how reserved Jaden had become, so careful, so impressively strategic but completely unauthentic. She'd been playing the part I'd been demanding of her so well that I'd forgotten what it was that had originally drawn me to her in the first place.

How much she fucking hated me.

It took a special kind of fucked-up individual to enjoy being hated by someone you desire so much, but the real joy was watching them fight themselves on it. Jaden might have hated me, but that didn't stop her body from loving everything I did to it, and it fucking killed her to admit it. She could try to deny it all she wanted, but her pussy couldn't lie to me, not when it knew who owned it.

This girl was fucking made for me; I could feel it in my bones, and after everything I'd learned on this honeymoon, I'd discovered I could have my cake and eat it too. I could have the best of both worlds. By allowing Jaden to openly hate me without reservation, I could easily manipulate the lines that blurred hate and love. And if I could get Jaden to love me, then I would never have to worry about trusting her again. I would finally own all of her.

Tomorrow was going to be a very interesting start to new things.

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Breakfast was fucking awkward ... at least it felt that way for me. Not so much for Darren. I was sitting across a small round table from him just outside a quiet café, nursing a headache from hell and failing to finish my half-eaten breakfast. Darren was currently sporting some bruising between both eyes, a busted swollen lip, an angry cut healing along his jaw, and the most satisfied grin I'd ever seen. He sipped his espresso like he hadn't a care in the world as he leaned back in his chair and watched the busy streets of Rome.

I'd never seen him so happy. Not even on our wedding day. It was ... disturbing.

When I'd woken up this morning, my arms and shoulders had been covered in bandages from last night's fuck fest over the glass covered floor. Darren must have cleaned me up and dressed my wounds while I was asleep. When I finally assessed myself in the mirror, I looked just as bad as he did minus the off grin. Some leftover makeup had smeared around my eyes, which were red and puffy, my hair was a goddamn disaster, my wrists and throat looked like an animal had attacked them, and the rest of my skin resembled a week-old banana. I looked like a demonic Raggedy Ann doll come to life.

I removed the bandages after a scalding bath that nearly cleansed my soul. The cuts were a little sore and red, but they weren't very deep and likely wouldn't scar. Although a sleeve of scars to match my wolf bite wouldn't be so bad. At some point, there wouldn't be enough room for the scars on the inside. The new ones would have to go somewhere else.

Apparently, Darren didn't even care about the damage to the suite. Clive and Owen mentioned it had cost him over \$100,000 or something, considering the amount of time it would take to repair the room and the amount of money they would lose from not being able to rent it out. And still he smiled. It was making my stomach churn.

He finally turned to see me staring at him, my face clearly unimpressed with his uncharacteristically chipper demeanor.

"What?" he asked.

"You're awfully chipper this morning."

He raised one eyebrow as he set his cup down. "And that's a bad thing?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "It's ... unsettling."

He laughed and relaxed in his chair, those bold dark blues of his assessing me with a warm intensity. "It's unsettling that your husband is happy?"

"After last night? Yes."

He shrugged. "I got exactly what I wanted last night."

I raised a brow. "A busted lip and two black eyes? Honey, all you had to do was ask."

He smiled. Full on fucking smiled.

"This," he said, gesturing to the two of us. "This right here."

"What the fuck is *this*?" I asked, mimicking his hand gestures.

"This? This is the real you. I didn't realize how much I missed that until recently."

I felt my stomach burning with rage all over again. He wanted the real me?

*More motherfucking games.*

"You made it very clear a very long time ago you didn't want the real me."

"Still misinterpreting my intentions, huh?"

I felt my hand begin to twitch as it ached to connect with his mouth.

All the shit I had suffered for, all the mental training of trying to keep myself in check, giving him all the right responses, the right reasons to get his kicks, everything I'd done to be the perfect version of what he wanted was all for fucking nothing. This "real me" he was talking about? I didn't even know who that bitch was anymore. Everything I was had all been for him, and now that was no longer what he wanted.

I could have killed him right there.

Placing my elbows on the table, I sank my head into my hands, my fingers beginning to grip my hair too tightly as I fought to keep my rage contained.

“Do you even know what you’re doing anymore?” I said in hushed tones, eyeing him through the parting of my hair. “Because it kinda feels like you’re just winging it now, and my mental state is seriously ready to check out again.”

Darren leaned forward to prop his elbows on the table and regard me closely. “You understand that strategies change when circumstances change, right?”

“Except you’re the one changing the circumstances. Because you can’t make up your fucking mind about what you want from me.”

“Jaden—”

“No, shut the fuck up,” I said, holding up my hand and cutting him off. “In the past year, I have done everything I could possibly think of to make you happy because that was what you expected from me. It was the only thing I concerned myself with just so I wouldn’t have to go back into that goddamn basement again. It was how I managed my PTSD because everything was about survival. I was nothing when I came out of that basement. Absolutely fucking nothing. And I know that’s what you wanted so you could mold me into your perfect vision from a fresh slate. And I let you. And now, after all that, after everything I have done for you and sacrificed for you, you take me to the one fucking thing I would rather light myself on fire than attend. And during our fucking honeymoon, no less! And you have the audacity to call it fucking therapy!? Why? Why would you do that to me! I didn’t need that! Do you have any idea how fucking betrayed I feel right now? How confused I am? Yet you sit here, looking pleased as a fucking peach! You’re driving me insane, and I am done playing your fucking games!”

I was trying to keep my voice down, but it was getting harder and harder to control my temper. I didn’t realize that I had stood and was now practically panting like the dog sitting at my feet, watching me with confusion in her pretty brown eyes. And she wasn’t the only one watching. Other people around us were beginning to stare in our direction, but it didn’t appear to be a concern of Darren’s. He seemed positively *entertained*.

“Feel better now?” Darren asked as he sat there comfortably with a little smirk on his face.

“NO!” I shouted at him, my heart rate suddenly shooting through the roof. Although I did feel marginally better getting all that off my chest after holding it in for so long, but the real frustration was that it wouldn’t change a single thing. Darren would still do whatever he wanted, and I would just have to adapt.

*Adapt. My favorite word. Fuck.*

God, I felt sick. Things were changing again, and my head was swimming with all kinds of horrible outcomes of what the future looked like when we got back to the estate. I needed to fucking breathe. I needed a moment away from Darren before I accidentally killed him in front of everyone.

I tried to relax my shoulders and exhaled a deep breath. “I’m gonna go throw up my breakfast.”

“You do that,” Darren said, a small smile in the corner of his busted lip as he took another sip of his espresso, his demeanor unchanging as he looked off into the distance.

Annoyed, I turned away from him, leaving Camaro behind. Making a beeline back into the café, I burst through the heavy door of the restroom before Clive and Owen could even stand outside the door. In a small moment of rebellion, I locked it just so I could secure my own damn privacy for once. I really needed to be alone right now.

I paced the floor for a few moments, just trying to catch my breath and calm down. I needed to get my shit together so I could figure out what the next step was, if there even was a next step.

Sid. I would need to talk to Sid. He could help me decipher this mess and figure out what I needed to do from here.

Gripping the sides of the sink, I stared myself down in the mirror, noticing the red flush of my cheeks from my anger and the dark rings around my eyes from stress. God, I felt like the mess I looked.

Opening one of the stalls, I did my business and quickly flushed, but as the noise of the water echoed off the walls, I could have sworn I heard something hit the floor. I stayed silent for a moment, believing I had been the only one in here and listened intently for any movement, but I heard nothing.



Suspicious, I hesitantly exited the stall and moved to wash my hands, my peripherals focused on the stalls behind me. Turning, I grabbed the paper towel, dried my hands, and as soon as I moved for the door the stall opened, and I almost screamed.

In an instant, my heart shattered into a million pieces and my breath caught in my lungs.

Tears licked at the corners of my eyes, blurring the vision I was sure wasn't real as the figure of my long-lost dreams approached.

He stood there for a moment, just staring at me as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing either, as if we were both trapped in some warped illusion that was both beautiful and cruel at the same time.

This couldn't be real. It couldn't. He couldn't be here. Fuck, it was too much.

"Jaden."

The memory of his voice set the tremors of my skin alive, the smooth deep richness that brought my heart back to a steady beat, letting me know that everything was all right.

I could feel him stepping closer and closer, and the longer I waited for the vision to pass, the stronger I felt it. That familiar smell of sandalwood that I loved flooded my nose, turning my reality against me.

It was real. He was real. And he was right in front of me.

Anguish tore at my heart as I instantly picked up my feet and leaped toward him, everything else around me completely forgotten as I slammed myself into his chest and held on to him like he was a ghost on the verge of slipping away. Because he very well could be.

"Jason," I barely breathed against him, finding his name tasting like sin.

The strength of his embrace as his arms circled around me, crushing me to his body was all the reassurance I needed to know that I was okay. That I would be okay. Because he was alive. Even as I cried into his shirt with so much relief I thought my heart would burst, I felt my soul come alive ... because my plan had worked. Jason was alive.

And then those large, strong hands of his moved to brushed my bare arms, and my eyes shot open to find a storm of green baring down at me. Those beautiful brilliant irises I could only secretly see in my dreams held my gaze until I finally came to terms of what was finally right in front of me.

“Hi, baby,” he said softly, and I swore I saw light coming from his eyes, giving me the peace I’d been wanting for so long.

Jason’s face wasn’t as I remembered, his beard had fully grown out evenly over his usually clean-shaven face, but his straight chocolate brown hair was shorter, almost messy yet somehow still stylish. Clad in black, he seemed taller now, bulkier than I remembered, as if he’d put on more muscle since I was taken. He looked massive now, rugged, a force of nature I hadn’t known was possible until now. My heart crumbled at how much I missed him.

I didn’t hesitate any longer as my lips sought his with a desperation stemming from what felt like centuries of loss. More tears of relief streamed down my face as giant red flags of warning flooded my mind, my head screaming at me to stop, that I was betraying Darren, but my heart was too at peace to stop now.

It was all I could do to mold myself to him as he kissed me with the passion I remembered, the passion I craved as I had laid in the cage of that fucking warehouse so long ago. God, it was like my soul had been released as I held him in my arms, clinging to the best of my past and flourishing in the powerful love that came from his kiss. It was torture to release him, but I suddenly remembered we didn’t have much time.

“Fuck, I’ve waited far too long for that,” he whispered, but as he looked down at me, his eyes suddenly narrowed, an angry frown forming his mouth as he started to really look me over.

“Jesus, Jaden, what the fuck happened to you? Did *he* do this?” he asked harshly, his whispered voice unable to contain the anger in it. Forcing myself back to reality, I imagined I didn’t look my very best right now with all the bruises and scrapes everywhere, so I couldn’t blame him. But my physical state was the least of my concerns at the moment.

I held up my hand to shush him, time now being the biggest concern for the both of us.

“Who the fuck cares. I’m fine. Now how the hell did you find me? How are you here right now?”

He smiled that soft half smile I was so fond of as his hands gently grasped either side of my face while his thumbs wiped away the remnants of my tears. “Unbelievable luck. I was scoping out the auction you were at last night before it was raided, and I saw you leave the building. I thought

my mind was seeing things, but I had your car followed. And here you fucking are.”

Holy shit. There was a lot of info in that statement.

“Wait. You were there last night? How? And it was raided?”

He nodded. “Since you’ve been gone, I’ve been working with an independent military unit that hunts traffickers and other international criminals. We had our eyes on Marcus Leoni for a while, and we were coordinating with the Italian police departments to bring him down. We were getting ready to engage when, by some stroke of luck, the wind blew your hair, and I caught sight of it from where I was waiting. After the raid, we tracked the car you entered to the Hassler. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to get you alone ever since.”

My mind was running in circles, trying to absorb everything he was saying. First, the auction had been raided right after we left, something Darren hadn’t mentioned, which meant all those girls had to have been rescued, a bunch of assholes got arrested, and there was one less scum bag in rotation. Holy fuck.

“What happened to those girls? Are they safe?”

Jason nodded, a flicker of hope in his eyes. “Yes, they’re going to be fine.”

I breathed the biggest sigh of relief of the century. “Thank fuck. Wait, do the police know I was there?”

He shook his head. “Their drives were wiped before we got there. No security footage. No files. No way to track the money. Just the assholes who were still there when we arrived.”

*Damn.* That meant Darren had gotten away again scot-free.

Fuck, speaking of Darren, I didn’t have much more time.

“Wait, are you here alone? Where are my brothers? My mom? What happened after I hung up with you?” I asked.

“They’re safe,” he said confidently. “I’ve been taking care of them in Germany, training them, educating them. Aaron and Brennan are so big now. They’re taller than you.”

I choked on a whispered laugh, relief saturating my heart knowing that my family was safe. That they were alive.

“How have you been surviving?” I asked, knowing I was running short on time with Clive and Owen just outside.

“After pooling our savings with your mom’s, I set us up with a place in Germany. And once we were settled, I set out to find you. I traced that number you called me from and discovered you were in San Diego. I tried to get the police in that area to look for you, but they said your body was already discovered in Detroit a week before, which was the day after you called me. A fucking drug overdose and they burned the body to prevent clear identification. I knew it was bullshit.”

Rage filled my gut at the memory, at what he likely had to go through to get my family safe. “I had to warn you. He was going to kill all of you to end my motivation to escape, so I would have nothing left to return to. He hoped that I would just give up. I had no idea you even made it out until he told me you didn’t show up at my funeral.”

Jason looked unimpressed. “Yeah, I could smell that trap a mile away. I knew whoever set up that body as yours would be hoping to lure us back. I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

I breathed my thousandth sigh of relief. Jason wasn’t an idiot, a total goof sometimes, but never an idiot. I knew I could count on him to keep my family safe ... because he *was* my fucking family.

“How did you get out undetected? How have you lasted this long?”

Jason smirked. “My buddy from work knows someone who has some contacts for fake IDs. Apparently, he does it for teenagers all the time, but the passports and visas were a little trickier. Got it done, though, so I owe him one. After withdrawing most of our money from the banks, we were on the next plane to France, where I bought a used car and drove us across the border into Germany. We stayed at a cheap motel until I could find us an apartment. And from there, our new livelihoods began, and we started our search for you.”

Pride swelled inside me. I fucking knew if anyone could do it, it would be Jason.

“I never stopped looking for you, Jaden,” he said, the blazing intensity of those mossy green eyes boring down into my bones. “Not for one second. I made some friends in Germany who helped me figure out who took you last year, and since then, I started working with that militarized anti-trafficking unit, and they’ve been helping me try to find you. But it hasn’t been easy. They’ve been monitoring this guy for a long time and plans have been in place to take him down for years. The problem is he’s got a lot of allies on his side and a fuck ton of firepower and money. But

he's not the only one with resources anymore. We might be a small group, but nothing is impossible."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing right now. Jason was planning to take on Darren? I felt myself choke again.

"How many of them are in this unit of yours?"

"Fifteen of us. But we're growing every day."

I shook my head. That wasn't enough. Not even close.

"He has men looking for you. You know that, right? You took a huge risk coming here."

He nodded. "I've already encountered his search team. They were impressive, but everyone cracks eventually."

I blanched. "You killed them?"

He nodded solemnly, his eyes dark as they were serious. "They won't be the last either."

Jason wasn't bred to be a killer like Darren was, but I knew when it came down to the wire, he would do what he had to without question. I'd seen him level plenty of people for attempting to fuck with me, so it wasn't that much of a surprise that he was willing to cross the line that most men refrained from just to find me. I never doubted him, and here he was, still proving me right.

"So then you know exactly what you're up against," I stated, hoping he understood exactly what he was walking into.

Jason nodded again, sadness clouding those mossy green eyes. "Which is why I know, as much as I hate myself for saying this, you can't come with me right now. Not yet," he murmured, his finger trailing along the silver collar that still ringed my neck. "I'd gladly let that asshole put a bullet in my head right now if it meant you could go free. But I know it's not that easy."

I shook my head, sniffing back my fears. "No, I need you alive, and you know that. Which is why you shouldn't have come. It's too dangerous."

Jason narrowed his eyes at me. "Tough shit. I couldn't stay away knowing you were so close. After finally finding you? I wasn't gonna let you slip away. I had to let you know what I've been doing. That you haven't been abandoned. I am not giving you up, Jaden, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you back. He is not the only one with a strong network. Not anymore."

His hands moved gently along my arms, his touch making my heart flutter and turning me into a traitorous criminal. His fingers trailed to my wrist, lifting it to find the tattoos that exposed Darren's claim over me to the world. Jason's thumb smeared over Darren's name, a scowl forming on his lips, hatred spreading across his handsome face.

"I have to make sure there's no one left to avenge him first," I whispered. "Otherwise, we'll be running for the rest of our lives. And it will be a very short life."

He nodded. "It's a tall order. But not impossible, Jaden. If you have any information that can help us, we could really use it."

And here it was, the next domino in line, the one that had been waiting patiently on the backburner of my stove of vengeance to be pushed over and restart the plan that would eventually bring Darren to his knees. Even after last night's events, with all the conditioning I'd been through, my brain still wanted to fight me into remaining loyal to Darren. My path for revenge had taken a huge detour for the past year, my only focus being that of gaining Darren's favor and trust. Considering that he had married me and I was currently alone in a public restroom knowing full well there were no recording devices on me, I had accomplished both.

But here was an opportunity to nuke the roadblock and get back on track so I could finally escape the life I knew wasn't meant for me. I wasn't an idiot. It didn't matter what I did or how well molded I became for Darren; he would never see me as the equal I wanted to be seen as. I would still be the second-class Toy Queen no matter how much blood I shed to earn my place.

Last night had proven there was no end to this insanity. I was tumbling farther and farther down a rabbit hole that even Darren didn't want to navigate through. He liked tampering with the compass too damn much because he never wanted to escape the fucked-up world he had created for us.

And now that I was married to him, it was only a matter of time before he wanted to start a family. And I could not let that happen. I would not subject a child to this lifestyle so they could end up like Darren and continue the cycle of horror on this planet. I would not be complicit in that. I would not corrupt a child. I had to believe there was still a chance of escape, and I was currently staring right at it.

After his betrayal of last night, he needed to fucking pay for it.

This was the end. And there was no going back now.

Within thirty seconds, I revealed everything I knew about Darren, his properties, family, businesses, business associates, employees, the police in his pocket, the warehouse I was at and where he could likely go for more information.

“You’ve got to dismantle Triguard,” I said hurriedly. “I’m not sure what it does, but I know he funnels all his money through it, and I know it owns several other companies throughout the country. It’s all connected.”

Jason nodded. “What else?”

I sighed as I thought deeper, and then remembered the invoice I saw in Darren’s office that might actually fuck some serious shit up. “There’s a company called Digital Frontiers that I think manages server farms, which includes the servers for Darren’s corporation. If you can locate those and destroy them all at the same time, you could cripple the entire corporation.”

“This is good. Anything else?”

“If you’re going to strike anything, you’ve got to target his network and remove his contacts one by one. Disrupt the money flow so he can’t afford to keep the army of people he has at his disposal. If you can find a way to freeze his accounts, that would be fantastic.”

Jason nodded again, his serious expression focusing on everything I said. Then his hands went to trace along the edges of my collar.

“The girls last night were wearing this same type of thing around their necks. I know it’s some kind of tracking device, but is it the same as theirs?”

I nodded. “Yes. It transmits a signal to Darren’s phone so that he knows where I am at all times. It also happens to be a fucking shock collar that measures my blood pressure, pulse, body temperature, shit like that.”

“Fucking bastard,” he groaned as he regarded the collar closely for a moment. “I wonder if I can find a way to track your signal by using their technology. I’m gonna look into it and see what I can do. At least this way I won’t completely lose you again.”

I nodded, not allowing myself to have any hope on that one. Once we separated from this bathroom, there was a good chance we may never see each other again. And it broke my heart all over again just thinking about it.

“You cannot, under any circumstances, trust the police on this, Jason,” I warned, my voice deadly serious. “They’re all in his pocket, so you can’t rely on them, which means you also have to avoid getting caught. You’re

going to have to get on Darren's level and be as dirty and ruthless as he is. You won't be able to afford to leave anyone alive in this. And it will change you."

Jason gazed down at me, the intensity of his stare reminding me of exactly who he was. A man undeterred ... and seriously pissed off. "I can handle it, Jaden. I'm going to do everything I can to get you out of this. This is not the end for you."

If only he knew how many times he'd said that to me in my dreams.

"There's a number you can reach me at whenever you can. It's secure and untraceable. Memorize the number."

Once he told me the number, I repeated it over and over like a lullaby to myself, sealing it deep into my memory for safekeeping.

"You listen to me; don't you dare let him catch you. If he does, he'll make me watch everything he does to you, and I won't survive that. Do not stand here and give me false hope in this. You understand?"

His hands clasped the sides of my face, his gaze intense as he stared down at me. "I promise you we will get through this. It won't be overnight, but I swear to you, I will not give up until you're free. Do you understand me?"

I nodded while my entire body was in shambles as I fought against the traitorous signals shooting through my nervous system. I was going against every instinct I had allowed myself to succumb to under Darren's ruling iron fist, but I was stronger than those false ideals.

Plus, I now had new murderous ideas running through my veins thanks to Darren's "therapeutic" intervention last night. He deserved everything coming his way.

My heart knew exactly what it wanted, and it was standing right in front of me. I would fight to the end to have it back or die trying.

"Mrs. Davis! You've been in there for fifteen goddamn minutes. Is everything all right?" called Clive as he banged on the bathroom door.

I almost jumped out of my fucking skin. At least he sounded bored out there, probably just thinking I was having another rebellious tantrum. He could think that for as long as he wanted if it gave me more time with Jason.

"How about you fuck off and let me throw up in peace!" I called back, sounding just as angry as I had when I first entered the bathroom.



“Do you need some assistance?” he asked from behind the still locked door, and I swear if I could have, I would have punched him right through it for interrupting my precious time.

“What part of fuck off wasn’t clear?” I yelled at the door.

When I turned back around, Jason was almost laughing at me. “Glad to see *you* haven’t changed.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. “We’re out of time. You’ve got to go before they find you,” I whispered hurriedly as I pushed Jason back toward the window I knew he climbed through.

Jason took my face in his hands and quickly kissed me with the same desperation I gave him. “I love you,” he affirmed.

“I love you too,” I replied, loving how perfect it felt to finally say that out loud, the rightness of it all. “Stay safe. Now go.”

I watched him slip back through the window, his large body barely fitting through it as I forced myself to turn back to the toilet, inserted my two fingers to the back of my throat and threw up my breakfast into the bowl.

When I finished, my body was practically shaking with what I had just done. I wouldn’t have been able to hold my breakfast in even if I wanted to.

I flushed the toilet and moved back to the sink to rinse my mouth out, swishing with the complimentary mouthwash that sat in a basket by the sink. I grabbed the small sample perfume from the same basket and spritzed my wrists and neck to hopefully cover Jason’s scent. It was better than nothing. God knew if Darren smelled another man on me, I would never live it down, and as of that very moment, I suddenly had a vested interest in living.

Opening the door to the bathroom, I was met with a very angry looking Clive as he looked me up and down, making the knots already forming in my stomach tighten even more.

“Did you actually throw up, or were you just trying to hide in there?” Owen asked, annoyed.

I rolled my eyes and ignored him, walking off back toward the table.

Every step I took was torture, my legs heavy and wobbly at the same time, my arms stinging where Jason had touched me as if he’d created burns that others could see. My mouth was dry as cotton, and each beat of my heart felt like a heavy pressure in my chest. I was going to hyperventilate and black the fuck out if I didn’t get my shit together right this second.

I turned the corner to where our table was and just one glance from Darren had me ready to vomit all over again, the knots squeezing my stomach tighter and tighter until it was a full-blown cramp. He was already taking note of my state as I walked toward him, fighting to keep myself from shaking, knowing what I’d just done.

*Fuck, there would be no mercy from him if he found out.*

I instantly started to fear for Jason. What if he were caught? What if the guards that usually followed Darren everywhere found him sneaking around? And with the way I was acting, there was no way I could keep this act going. I couldn’t leave his escape to chance. I wanted Darren distracted and back on the yacht so we could get the fuck out of here and away from Jason. Now.

So instead of going back to the table to sit down, I stared him down to make sure I had his attention and walked right past the table toward the

street. Darren looked confused.

“We’re leaving,” I declared. “Now.” And I kept walking, knowing full well that would get his ass moving.

I could see our car parked just down the street, but I didn’t get another step as my arm was yanked, and I was swiftly pulled back.

“Hey! Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Darren said angrily from behind me.

I tried to shake him off as I turned to face him, but he wasn’t letting go, which was doing wonders for all the scrapes on my arm.

“I said we’re leaving,” I snarled, squaring off with him. “This honeymoon is officially fucking ruined, and I don’t want to be here anymore.” At least the car was cognizant of my requests as it started to pull toward us.

Darren yanked me against him. “Watch your mouth. You think the rules have changed or something?” he questioned as he glared down at me. “We leave when I say we leave. Not the other way around.”

I tried to jerk away from him, but he continued to reinforce his grip until pain shot through my arm, causing me to abruptly stop. “You don’t want to push me on this, Darren. I’m already high strung as it is. I doubt you want to cause a scene with me in public.”

His brows rose in surprise. “You think I give a shit if others witness the consequences of your actions? If you want a scene, sweetheart, I’ll give you a fucking scene.”

Darren made one single move before the air behind me erupted with hot fire and a cataclysmic boom that stunned my ears. I felt a tight grip on the back of my neck as I was instantly shoved to the ground under Darren’s body while more bodies toppled ours.

My ears rang like crazy, I couldn’t hear shit, and from my position, I couldn’t see shit either. It was several seconds before I was finally dragged up to standing and swiftly pulled back inside the café. Because that was when the bullets started to rain.

One glimpse was all I was able to spare as my eyes landed on the car that was completely engulfed in flames. Someone had blown up our car.

Darren shoved me to the floor in a tight corner of the café. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but based on the movement of his lips, it was probably something along the lines of *stay put*. I could feel myself begin to

freeze up from shock at what was happening even though my brain could hardly comprehend it.

We were being attacked. Openly. In public. In broad daylight.

I could feel my heart racing in my chest as I tried not to panic, my blood coursing through my veins and making me dizzy. I was about to lose it until the feel of a large, wet tongue licking my face suddenly brought me back to reality.

*Camaro!*

I focused my eyes to see my dog standing in front of me, barking at me and licking me to get my attention. Finally finding my focus, I grabbed on to her and pulled her close while my eyes moved beyond her to assess the situation.

Clive and Owen were standing in front of me with their guns drawn as they stared out the window, firing through it every so often. Farther on, Darren was at another window with Scott and two other guards as they fired through the glass. I could see they were shouting at each other, but my ears were still ringing, muffling all the noise around me.

And then one of the guards hit the ground with a bullet in his head.

My mouth went dry at the sight.

This was it. This was the moment Darren had warned me about so long ago. This was my new reality as bullets sprayed into the building, and here I was frozen on the ground like a fucking mouse because I didn't have anything to fight back with.

With each passing second, I practically willed my hearing to come back, but all I could achieve was muffled garbage. It sounded like some action film on TV on a really low volume. Just noise everywhere until one thing finally became clear.

"Get her the fuck out of here!" I heard Darren shout.

Clive turned from his firing position and grabbed my arm, pulling me up from the floor and leading me through the back of the café. Camaro stayed hot on my heels while Owen fired back from behind us. Moving quickly through the hallway to the back, Clive burst through the back door that led us into a back alley where another car had pulled up, one of Darren's guys in the driver's seat.

But just as the car came to a stop, two more cars swerved to the side, completely blocking it in. The driver didn't last long as a bullet suddenly entered his skull, causing his head to smash against the driver's side

window. Four men exited the car in front of us and five more from the one behind, their guns drawn.

“Back inside!” Clive shouted as he and Owen both open fired, ducking behind the only cover we had, half a crumbling brick wall. Bullets ricochet off the brick building as they traded gun fire with the other men, the noise deafening me all over again. Ducking low, I pulled Camaro close to my chest as she barked and jumped and tried to pull the back door open that led back inside the restaurant, but it was locked from the inside.

*Shit.*

“It’s fucking locked!” I shouted.

Even with them blocking my body with theirs and the half wall, I could see them drop three men from the first car in front of them, but there were still six others behind the other car. Someone then pulled out what looked like an M16 rifle from the trunk and began to spray the entire back alley with bullets. Clive and Owen ducked down, but it gave the opposition exactly what they needed to gain: reach.

Being tucked behind Clive and Owen, I didn’t have much mobility, but Camaro was not about to be bound by them. The first thing I was able to see was the barrel of the rifle and the next, Camaro lunging into the air while her teeth sank into the neck of the shooter, forcing him to jerk and scream, the gun now pointing toward the sky as he howled in pain. Clive and Owen then immediately reacted, kicking the rifle out of his hands, but by then, three more men had descended on us.

Clive and Owen each took on their own man, knocking away their guns and wrestling them to the ground. My first instinct was to grab one, but with Camaro still gnawing on the throat of the first shooter, I found myself squaring off with my own assailant as my arm was suddenly gripped and I was thrown over a meaty shoulder.

My instinct finally kicked in like a shot of adrenaline.

Lifting my upper body, I wrapped my legs around the guy’s hips and shoved my thumbs into his eyes. He screamed something fierce as his hands gripped my wrists to pull them off, but it just made me dig harder until blood was dripping down the sides of his face. I then felt his knee give in a little, a new scream hitting my ears as he toppled to the ground. Looking down, I saw Camaro currently had the back of his calf in her mouth and was starting to play tug-of-war with it.

*That’s my girl.*

Finally focused, I shoved my palm into the guy's nose, sending his head back and opening his throat to me. With as much force as I could, I punched his throat in until I swore I felt something snap. He went down like a ton of bricks, completely silent. I managed to land on my feet, turning just in time to see Clive take two shots to the chest and hit the ground.

*Fuck!*

That was when I saw a large fist come into my peripherals, and I managed to duck down just in time, narrowly missing the punch that probably would have knocked me on my ass. But my attacker recovered quickly, and I found my upper body suddenly trapped in a bear hug from behind.

*Fuck.*

I tried head-butting him with the back of my head, but he was too tall.

*"Afferra le gambe!"* he yelled from behind me as another gunman quickly approached.

He crouched down in an attempt to grab my legs, but I just kicked him in the face, sending him on his ass as I continued to struggle with the guy behind me.

"Get the fuck off me!" I shouted as the guy started to drag me toward the car.

I glanced back at Clive and Owen, watching Owen still fighting against two guys while Clive lay on the ground attempting to reload his gun.

The man I had kicked in the face was now up again, coming toward me and almost within reach when he stopped, a painful wince forming on his face as he screamed. Camaro was currently gnawing at his ankle. But then he moved to draw his gun.

In a state of panic, my legs instantly drew up to kick his gun away and catch his neck between my feet.

"Don't you dare fucking shoot my dog!" I screamed at him.

But now that my feet were no longer dragging on the ground, the guy behind me holding me up was able to maneuver me toward the car.

One of the car doors opened, and I was roughly yanked away from the man my feet were attempting to choke out and tossed into the back seat.

The guy quickly climbed in behind me and shouted at the driver. "Go!"

I hadn't even righted myself in my seat as the driver sped off while another in the passenger seat turned to look me over.

Where in the fuck did they think they were taking me?

I didn't feel like finding out.

In the span of a single second, I pulled my knees in and kicked the head of the guy in the back seat into the window of the door, the glass shattering as blood splattered on it. He was out. The other man in the front seat reacted by pulling out his gun, but I wasn't giving him the chance to aim it at me.

Grabbing the headrest of the seat in front of me for leverage, I kicked his gun away, causing it to fall to the floor in front of him, and brought my heel up to kick him in the face. I then moved my leg back to kick the driver in the head. I swung my foot back and forth at least two more times, kicking each one in the head as hard as I could before my foot then went for the steering wheel, and I twisted my body, forcing it to turn to the right. The car crashed into the side of the brick wall that separated the alleyway, causing both airbags to deploy. I managed to pull my leg away just in time, but considering the driver only got to about twenty miles an hour, the impact wasn't as bad as I'd expected.

Barking coming from down the road brought me back to the reality that I needed to get the fuck out of there. Both men in the front seat were moaning as they tried to regain their composure from their injuries.

*No chance, fuckers.*

Searching the body of the man in the back seat, I found his gun strapped to his side. Yanking it out, I pulled back the slide to check if a bullet was in the chamber, then aimed and fired at each of their heads without even thinking.

My ears stung all over again, the loud bang of each shot sending all kinds of pain throughout my head. I could feel my entire body shake as the adrenaline coursed through my veins, my heart on the verge of exploding if I didn't get a grip.

*Fuck, I just killed three people.*

Suddenly, the guy who I thought was dead in the back seat started to stir. I moved quickly, aiming and firing all over again to plant a bullet in his head as well, enduring another sharp blast to my ears.

*Fuck, okay, now you've killed three people. Maybe even four.*

Turning back to search for Clive and Owen, I could see Clive leaning against the wall of the café as he clutched his side while holding a gun at one of the men on the ground. Owen then stood up and started calling my name. As soon as he did, Darren, Scott, and one remaining guard exited through the back door of the café, all three of them bleeding.

*Fuck.*

I moved to open the car door to run back to them when another SUV came rushing around the corner, tires squealing as it came to a stop just a few feet in front of them. Four more men then exited and began firing at them from behind their open doors.

I suddenly saw myself faced with a choice. I could either figure out a way to help them, or I could leave them to die. If I left them, there was a chance I could get caught by the others, and I had no way of knowing their intentions. But if I stayed ...

*Better the devil you know.*

Cringing at what I was about to do, I turned to look in the trunk for anything of use. There were a fuck ton of weapons lying all over the place – guns, knives, ammunition – but one little thing stood out that would do the job. Reaching down, I grabbed one of the grenades that was strapped to a belt and exited the car. Careful not to land myself within the line of fire, I stayed back far enough before I pulled the pin and underhand chunked it so that it rolled right under the car.

Racing back behind the safety of the car I'd crashed, I cupped my ears and braced myself as the biggest explosion I'd ever seen and heard erupted from within the car, sending it ten feet into the air before it landed in a crumpled mess.

Once the gunfire had stopped, I poked my head around the hood of the car to see Darren and Scott stepping around from their cover, staring at the car in confusion. I figured now was as good of a time as ever to get my ass back there.

Stepping out from behind the car, I made my way over to them, careful to give myself enough distance as I jogged around the car. The heat of the flames licked at my skin as I looked down to see the scattered limbs on the ground. Camaro came barreling from around Owen as she jumped at me, barking up a storm as if she were reprimanding me. I was just about to bend down to calm her, but my arm was yanked into a tight grip. Again.

"Where the fuck were you?!" Darren shouted at me, his eyes blazing with intensity and violence.

I glared at him. "Over there," I replied, pointing at the car I crashed. "Saving your ass."

"That was you?" He pointed at the burning SUV.

"You're welcome."



Darren was about to reply when two more SUVs quickly approached from behind him before slowing to a stop before us. I recognized two of Darren's men as they stepped out from behind the wheel, acknowledging us both with a simple nod. Darren sighed and returned his attention to me.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice now stern and cold.

"No."

"Get in the car," he replied as he tugged me toward the vehicle, the back door opening as we approached.

Darren nearly shoved me inside while Camaro jumped in after me and hopped into the space of the trunk behind me, her head sticking out next to me as she looked in every direction for more threats. Darren then turned back around to assess Clive and Owen while Scott and another guard picked up one of our attackers from the ground and carried him to the trunk of the second vehicle. He must still be alive if they were taking him with us, which meant he was going to have a very unpleasant awakening.

Owen assisted Clive into the back seat of the same car and climbed in with him as the other guard then got in the passenger seat, and the car took off.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask as Darren finally climbed into the back seat with me and Scott in the front passenger seat, but I decided silence was probably best right now.

"Head back to the yacht," he said to the driver as he placed his gun back inside his jacket, released a deep sigh, and then turned to me.

"Jaden, look at me," he said, his voice much calmer now. "Tell me everything that happened when you entered the ally, down to the very most minor detail."

Releasing a deep breath, I did as he asked, explaining everything that happened, everything I had done, the men I killed, the fact that they tried to take me, and the effectiveness of Camaro after seeing her in real action for the first time. But as soon as I revealed the moment they got me into the car, I could see the rage begin to build in his eyes.

"Why the fuck did you let them get you into the car?" he growled.

I furrowed my brows at him. "Maybe you missed the part where I said I killed them."

Darren shook his head in disappointment. "They should have never been able to get you in the car in the first place! All that training, and for

what, so you can still end up in the hands of my enemies. God-fucking-dammit!”

I felt my blood pressure spike.

“Are you fucking kidding me! I killed like seven people and totaled two vehicles in the span of minutes, and that’s not enough for you!? Fuck, you’re impossible.”

Darren’s hand shot out to grip my entire jaw and yanked me forward. “You should have killed them *before* they got you in the car, not after. Once you’re in the car, your chances of escape are slim to none, and I won’t have you risking that ever again. Now keep your damn mouth shut. I don’t want to hear another word.”

He released me with a shove, and I immediately sank back into my seat, my eyes glaring at literally everything out the window. We passed several speeding police vehicles headed in the direction of the shootout. They were a little late to the game.

The ride back to the yacht was silent, but the tension in the car was so palpable, I swear, it was fogging the damn windows. I was so unbelievably pissed. After everything I had done to save his stupid ungrateful ass, it still wasn’t good enough. And that fucking stung. I trained so damn much, worked so damn hard so I could be just a drop as good as Darren was, and he just trashed it.

*Fucking dick.*

When we finally arrived at the marina, the two guards carried the still unconscious gunman onto the yacht, taking him down below to the soundproof vaults with drains I knew Darren had down there. Clive was taken away by the medical staff while Owen followed me and Camaro toward our bedroom. I seriously needed a fucking shower now.

“Jaden,” Darren called from the stairway where everyone else had gone, “I want you here for this.”

I felt my stomach immediately clench. “What? Why?”

“Because I said so. Let’s go,” he said as he turned and headed downstairs.

Owen sighed and gripped my arm when I didn’t move. “Come on, Mrs. Davis,” he chided as he rolled his eyes.

God, I fucking hated this part. No matter how much I could stomach them, I hated torture sessions. It was the greatest strain not to react or grimace in any way, to remain silent while they screamed until their vocal

cords gave out. And after what this guy tried to do, I doubted Darren would have any mercy for him.

This was going to be bad.

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My rage was becoming too difficult to contain as I waited for Scott to finish stringing one of our attackers up, hanging him by his wrists over the hook that hung from the chain link in the ceiling. I'd used this soundproof vault several times in the past, the drain in the middle of the floor useful for easy clean up, and the industrial waste shredder in the corner of the room made disposals simple as they were casually dumped into the sea.

The two men who helped carry him in, Shane and Luis, stood just behind me while Owen shadowed Jaden who was leaning against the wall, as far away as she could be with her arms and ankles crossed and a pretty scowl on her face. Even with her torn dirty sundress, wild hair, and the bruises from last night, she looked like a little war doll. It was sort of cute.

I knew she hated these torture sessions, but they were necessary for her. I needed her hardened, unfazed by shit like this. Hell, maybe she'd even pick up a few tips and tricks if she paid close enough attention. It was all for her benefit, whether she wanted to see it that way or not.

When Scott was finally finished, he slapped the fucker across the face to wake him. He groaned before his eyes started to drift open, his limbs stretching against the restriction of the chain before he slowly lifted his head and realized the shit he was in.

I stepped toward him, noticing his shorter stature but wider mass and square shoulders. He barely came up to my chin even with his body stretched high.

*"Who are you?"* I asked in Italian.

His dark brown eyes glanced up to meet mine and glared.

“Fuck you,” he replied, that familiar look of defiance gleaming back at me.

I nodded and turned away. “Cut off his clothes.”

The sounds of cloth being shredded away as the man grunted and growled in protest came to me as my eyes glanced at Jaden, her face passive as she remained a stone against the wall.

Her eyes were working overtime to avoid mine.

When the two guards finished, I walked over to one of the various handles sticking out of the wall and pulled out a drawer of knives. Grabbing my favorite one, I made my way back over to the fuck who was now shaking slightly, likely from fear and the fact that it was deliberately sixty degrees Fahrenheit down here.

I held the knife up to his face and spoke again in Italian. “*I’m going to give you one last chance. For every question you don’t answer honestly, I’m going to cut a small chunk out of you until I can see your ribs.*” I waited for the comprehension to manifest in his eyes, and when the fear finally came, I felt my entire body soar with satisfaction.

He managed to nod.

“*What is your name?*”

“*Paolo,*” he answered with a shaky heavy Italian accent.

“*Why did you attack us?*”

He hesitated for a moment, grimacing as he answered. “*Orders.*”

“*Whose orders?*”

That was when Paolo started to visibly sweat. I knew it was Mario. He was probably already out of jail and gave his men the final orders to take me down. But they had tried to take Jaden, and I wanted to know why.

I looked at Paolo expectantly, raising my brows as I waited for him to answer, but all he did was display a face of regret.

I certainly wasn’t sorry.

Taking my knife, I carved a thin line down the side of his torso where his rib cage was protruding, curving the knife around and back up to connect to my first cut. Paolo’s screams echoed off the walls as blood began to drip down his body. But the worst was far from over. Taking the top of the cut I made, I pinched the skin and pulled, using my knife to peel away the little piece of flesh from Paolo’s body. When it was free, I held it up to Paolo’s screaming face so he could see exactly what that lack of an answer cost him.

Paolo was in full-on panic mode now, his breathing incredibly erratic as he screamed and cried, tears pouring from his eyes to run down his face. I'd cut away the equivalent of a popsicle stick from him, and he was acting like it was the end of the world.

*"Ready to try again?"*

*"You sick bastard!"* he shouted at me as he writhed and strained in his position.

This time, I pointed directly at Jaden, who looked even stiffer than she had before. *"Why were you trying to take her?"* I asked.

*"I don't know!"* he screamed, his voice cracking already. *"He just said to bring her back alive!"*

*"Who?"* I roared.

Paolo shook his head with strain. *"He'll kill me if I say!"*

*"I'M gonna kill you if you don't say, you stupid shit!"* I moved my knife to the other side of his ribs, slicing away another popsicle stick-sized chunk and held it up for him to see before dropping it at his feet to join the other. Blood was beginning to drip to the floor, pooling at the drain site at Paolo's feet. If he didn't start giving me the info I wanted, his blood was going to be running a lot faster down that drain.

When Paolo's screaming returned to crying, I tried again. *"I can make this last a very long time, Paolo. I can cauterize every wound I make, administer an IV with fluids, and keep you alive for days if I want to. Or you can end this now so we won't have to waste any more time. One way or another, I will get my answers. It just depends on how much pain you want to endure."*

Hopelessness finally washed over his face, his eyes glazing over as he came to the realization he didn't want to die in shreds. No one's loyalty was worth that much when they were facing what I was offering.

*"Give me a name, Paolo, and this will all be over. I've only cut two chunks from you, and there's still a lot left."*

Paolo nodded, his eyes moving back and forth as he considered his decision, but I was done waiting and moved my knife again.

*"MARIO RICCI!"* he finally screamed.

Pulling my knife away, I smiled down at Paolo as he looked up at me with those beckoning eyes, pleading me for mercy now that he had given me what I wanted.

“Thank you, Paolo,” I said and nodded to Scott. After turning on the waste shredder, Scott and Luis pulled Paolo down from the chained hook and dragged him over to the shredder. I washed and dried my hands in the small sink against the wall and turned around to see the panic slowly spreading over Jaden’s face. She was about ready to look away from what was going to happen, but this session was not over. There was still a lesson to be learned.

“No, no! *Per favore! Per favore!* No!” Paolo screamed as he struggled against Scott and Luis.

Jaden turned away from the scene, one foot headed toward the door before I grabbed her and forced her to turn back around.

“Darren, please, you got what you wanted out of him. This is over.”

“It’ll be over in about twenty seconds.”

“NOOOOOOAAAAHHHHH!”

Jaden jerked wildly as the sound of Paolo’s screams intertwined with the sound of his bones and limbs being crushed and shredded under the weight and pressure of the blades.

“Don’t you dare close your eyes,” I growled at her as I held her face in my hand to make sure of it. Her small hands gripped my arms as she strained against me, her knees giving out slightly as her breathing increased.

In a matter of seconds, Paolo’s screams had quieted, and the remaining pieces of his body were being washed away under the yacht.

“Why? Why didn’t you just shoot him first?” Jaden asked through gritted teeth.

I pulled her to stand straight and gently rubbed my thumb along her cheek, admiring the softness of her skin. “Because this is what happens when someone tries to take you from me,” I said softly, adoring the alarm building in her pretty hazel eyes. “There will be no mercy in any sense of the word. Fuck with what’s mine, and I will enjoy subjecting them to the most brutal and grotesque final moments of their lives.”

Jaden visibly stiffened as understanding overcame her, and her eyes wandered into the distance behind me. I shrugged to bring her back to reality. “Plus, I figured your eardrums have probably sustained enough damage for one day,” I added. “But I want you to reflect on something here, my little wife. The next time you ever get bold enough to challenge me in public and lash out the way you did or deliberately put yourself in danger to help, I want you to remember this moment. Because this look in your eyes

right now? It's fucking beautiful, and I've got a lot of enemies and waste shredders everywhere. Don't make me do something you'll regret." I leaned down, keeping her gorgeous traumatized face in my hands as I kissed the side of her head. "Understand, pumpkin?"

She managed to blink a few times before her mouth turned into a grimace, a small nod being her only reply. "That's my girl. Now come on, you need a shower, and I have warfare to plan."

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It was a day later, and I still couldn't get the sound of Paolo's screams out of my head. Even with the deafening effects of the gunshots and explosions, the echoing capabilities of that vault did nothing to silence the screams that never ceased to end. I kept my headphones in constantly, the volume of my music drowning out all outside noise, anything I could do to keep myself distracted from those screams. But no matter how hard I tried to distract myself, there wasn't shit I could do about the images that just wouldn't go away.

What was worse was that after a while the screams started to morph into someone else's, and soon, all I could think about was Jason and the idea of him enduring something as horrific as that. And it was almost enough to make me regret encouraging him to fight back for me. Because there was a good chance he wouldn't survive. How would I live with myself if something happened to him? The thought made me sick, and I knew I wouldn't survive it. I'd probably just off myself right then and there. I'd rather die than live with that nightmare in my head. But ultimately, even if I told Jason to turn around and never think of me again, he would have just fought even harder, and not having any of the information I gave him would have put him at an even greater disadvantage. He'd be as good as dead at that point.

Fuck, I was going to drive myself crazy with worry now, wondering where Jason was, what he was doing, and if Darren was still keeping tabs on him. At least he didn't seem to notice my turmoil as I sat like petrified wood in my seat on the plane. He was busy making plans with Scott in the back where they wouldn't be disturbed. I was so pissed at him for making

me watch Paolo's end, but based on what he'd said after, I didn't want to fight. For once, I preferred an attempt at just forgetting instead, which I was currently failing at miserably.

I couldn't tell what was more distressing – witnessing that or being attacked by a bunch of gunmen and fighting for my life. I decided I'd rather fight the gunmen. At least I could almost choose how they died. I felt traumatized all over again, paralyzed with disgust and horror. Yes, Paolo had assisted in my attempted kidnapping and the attempted murder of my dumb fuck babysitters, but holy shit – there had to be limits. I felt as if Darren had crossed some imaginary torture treaty line somewhere, but I knew in this world, he made the rules, and he could make them as gruesome as he wanted.

I'd barely said a word to him as we made our way back to his estate, but thankfully, he was too busy strategizing his revenge with Scott. He was still pissed at Clive and Owen – one for Clive getting injured and two because I'd been temporarily taken – but they were the most capable guards he had, and if it had been anyone else, we all might have been killed instead.

As I rode in the back seat of the car, my stomach clenched as we passed the gate to Darren's estate. We'd been away for nearly two weeks, and after everything that had happened, I didn't know how I was going to force myself to walk through that front door again.

Once the car pulled to a stop, Darren got out, and the guard who was sitting in the front passenger seat opened my door for me, giving me the silent boot. Keeping my groan to myself, I stepped out, which was as far as I got before Darren swept me up into his arms and began carrying me toward the door.

"What are you doing?"

"Carrying you across the threshold," he replied lightly as if my question was stupid.

"Seriously?" He still had marital traditions on his mind?

The smirk on his face told me he was serious as he walked through the opened front door and continued up the stairs.

"Okay, threshold has been breached. You can put me down now," I protested as I started to squirm.

"When I'm good and ready," Darren replied, clutching me tighter.

He made his way down the hall toward my old bedroom and finally put me down in front of the door.

“I have a surprise for you.” There was a hint of playfulness in those beautiful dark blues of his, but that didn’t exactly mean that what was behind the door was entirely safe.

“Joy.” He knew I hated his surprises, and I made sure he could see the level of distrust all over my face.

He opened the door and ushered me inside, but I found myself confused as I stepped onto the freshly cleaned carpet. The room was completely bare. All the bedroom furniture was gone, the windows bare of their curtains, and the walls were completely white.

“Damn, I thought there was going to be a tiger in here,” I said, sounding disappointed.

“Do you want one?”

I turned excited. “For real?”

He chuckled before his face went serious again. “No. One baby tiger around here is enough. I can’t imagine having a full-grown adult as well.”

I raised a brow at him. *Was ... was that a fucking joke?*

“Anyway, this empty space is your surprise because I’m going to let you redecorate it however you want.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “However I want ...?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, paint it, expand it, turn it into a basketball court. I don’t care as long as you do something with it. There are a bunch of home magazines and catalogs in my office that you can go through and order whatever you need. Furniture, lights, electronics, art, a PlayStation, whatever. I’m giving you a blank canvas to turn into anything you want. Make it your own.”

I furrowed my brows at him. “Why?”

He rolled his eyes as he stepped toward me, his massive bulk always taking up more space than any normal human being ever should.

“The proper response was ‘thank you, Darren. You’re the best husband.’”

I snorted. Was it too late for an annulment? “You don’t do nice things without a reason. There’s a benefit for you in here somewhere.” I studied him for a moment. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“Probably about a week.”

“Ah,” I said, smirking as I turned to regard the room. “I see. So this is my distraction while you’re gone. Something to keep me busy?”

“I didn’t realize you needed a distraction in my absence,” he replied, his voice growing dark.

“Neither did I, but for some reason, this time you clearly think I do.”

“Do you have to argue about everything?”

“Do you have to deflect this hard?”

“Enough, Jaden,” he declared, his stern voice cutting me off. “If this is how you want to act when I do something nice for you, then I’ll take the hint and stop bothering. Or you can play the grateful little wife and have some fun with a bit of retail shopping and some interior decorating. What’s it going to be?”

I huffed a breath of annoyance. What the fuck was this, my training as his little homemaker? “You’re just pissed because I know you so well. But fine, I will take your little carrot and turn it into a garden if that is what you want.”

Darren rolled his eyes again. “Okay, drama queen, let’s go. I’ve got a lot of shit to take care of before I leave.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and escorted me out of the room and back down the hall.

“Which is when?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow morning couldn’t come fast enough.

I spent the next two hours in Darren’s office looking through catalogs while listening to him make plans and strategize with Scott to take down the guy who organized our attack. I was actually surprised I was even privy to them, but it was educating getting to listen in on his thought process, how he assessed potential problems and how to resolve them, what to expect, who to look for, and what weapons they would need. I felt absolutely fucking stupid sitting there deciding on drapes while they discussed artillery.

At least Camaro remained disinterested as she rested on the floor by my side. I’d picked out a nice big bed for her and some new Frisbees that lit up so we could play in the dark. As I tried to plan out my little “me space,” my eyes couldn’t help but wander around Darren’s office. I wasn’t allowed in here very often, but I’d already picked up on the differences since the last time I’d been in here. Some of our wedding photos had already been hung on the wall just behind his desk. There were even a few candid shots from our honeymoon of me smiling while holding his hand. Jesus, it was

amazing how quickly things could change around here; the entire dynamic of our relationship reverted back to the near beginning, something for the life of me I still could not understand.

When I finished choosing everything I wanted, I excused myself to take Camaro for a walk outside. Darren just waved me off, too deep into his planning. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was a little excited at the prospect of bringing Mario Ricci down. I guess it wasn't all that surprising, considering who he was. He loved a challenge. He loved to crush it.

As I walked through the house, everything felt different. I saw more of the staff who actually smiled at me, the guards actually acknowledged me with a little nod instead of completely ignoring me. Suddenly, my status made me more relevant in the house, and it sort of annoyed the fuck out of me. As if I was a little less important last month than I was now.

Grabbing one of the foamy little footballs from Camaro's toy box outside, I threw the ball into the air, creating a perfect little spiral as Camaro ran after it. She caught it midair and ran back toward me so I could throw it around. Guards were strolling along the grounds, watching as I threw the ball and chuckling quietly to themselves when Camaro would catch it. And it gave me an idea.

Tossing the ball way to the right so Camaro would really have to run, the ball landed right next to one of the guards, smashing into a bush where Camaro couldn't reach it.

"Sorry! Can you throw it back?" I called.

The guard smiled, reached into the bush, and pulled out the ball. Camaro barked at it, jumping back and forth as she waited for the guard to throw it. He taunted her with it while the other guard laughed and encouraged him to throw it. I held my arms up, waving him on before he finally threw it, the ball gliding through the air as Camaro chased after it. It landed swiftly in my hands, and I quickly threw it back toward the guard who caught it without hesitation, officially inspiring a game of keep-away from Camaro.

Eventually, the other guard moved off to the side, holding his hands up to receive a catch, making Camaro chase after him as well. We played this back and forth for about twenty minutes, and I could tell the guards were enjoying themselves. I had to cut it short, though, before we got caught, nodding to them in thanks for assisting in Camaro's exercise and heading inside for dinner. The guards actually waved back at me.

Win.

“Did you find everything you needed in those catalogs?” Darren asked as we finished our dinner in the main dining room.

“Mmhmm,” I mumbled, swallowing my last bite. “I just need to order some books to fill the shelves of the bookshelf I ordered.”

“Why don’t you just take some from the library?”

“When’s the last time you looked through that library? No offense, but your stock is pretty outdated. You could use some new material in there.”

Darren scoffed, seeming almost offended. “There’s nothing wrong with the selection in there. Even outdated material is still good material.”

“And how exactly would you know? You don’t really seem like the type to enjoy fiction.”

Darren raised a brow at me. “You’re awfully judgmental this evening. I actually used to be an avid reader before my mother died.”

*And as soon as she died, so did the rest of his childhood.*

“What’s your favorite book then?” I asked genuinely.

Darren smirked. “*Lord of the Flies*. I read it several times as a child actually.”

*Why was that completely unsurprising?*

“Why is that your favorite?”

“Because it showed the truth of human beings. Take away the rules, perceived morality, and the expectations of society and you’ll see the true nature of man – that we’re all just a bunch of animals trying to survive. And we will always feed the darker, selfish side because that’s the one that thrives in conflict.”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “You like it because you identify with it.”

“Naturally,” he agreed with a nod. “Humans are meant to dominate, but society keeps its nature contained. They like to pretend we’re good incarnate, born innocent, but that’s just bullshit. Children are the most selfish things on the planet. They have to be taught to share and taught to love, to care, and to be good. No one teaches you how to be selfish, how to just take what you want, to serve yourself. That just comes naturally. Because that’s who we really are.”

I regarded him closely, wondering if I really wanted to go this deep with him.

“I see. So that’s why you feel no guilt for doing what you do. Because that’s what you’re supposed to do? You’re just not denying yourself the

natural order of things.”

“Look at you, finally starting to understand me.” He snickered.

“Don’t get too excited. Just because I understand doesn’t mean I agree.”

“You don’t have to agree. It’s basic human nature.”

“But you see, I think overcoming what is so easy to give in to is what actually makes us strong. I think denying yourself the easy route of guiltless selfishness and actually earning your way makes you something more than just what nature intended. It makes you greater. When you can resist your own demons, you can overcome anything.”

Darren sneered at me. “I prefer to embrace my inner demons. They’re the reason I’ve *overcome* everything I have.”

I shook my head at him, my voice somber with contrite. “You don’t have inner demons, Darren. You are one.”

For once, he didn’t disagree.

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Darren's cock woke me up in the early morning, his hard thickness driving into me and shocking me awake with his sheer force and the undeniable pleasure. He was going to be gone for about a week, and he needed to get his fix in now before he left.

"Be a good girl while I'm gone," he said as he zipped his pants back up.

"Where's the fun in that?" I mumbled sleepily into my pillow.

"Your stuff should be arriving tomorrow, but the painters will be here today. Give them the instructions they need, then let them work."

"What time?"

"Noon."

"Okay."

"There's one other thing."

"There doesn't have to be," I interrupted as I tucked myself deeper into the sheets. It was seven a.m., and all I wanted to do was go back to sleep, but he wouldn't stop talking.

Darren sat down on the bed and leaned over me. "I've added a new member to the staff for you. You can think of her as something of a personal assistant."

I turned and scowled at him. After what happened to Holly, I didn't need to subject another poor soul to Darren's employment.

I sat up on my elbows and glared at him. "What are you talking about? Why would I need an assistant?"

"Your bodyguards are not your secretaries, and I can't always be here to arrange for when you need something. Trust me, this benefits everyone."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What the hell could I possibly need that I don't already have?"



He sneered at me, that shark grin of his eating up some compliment I accidentally revealed. "I'm flattered you find me such an excellent provider, but you are running low on paint supplies and Camaro is down to her last dog bone."

"So? Don't you already have someone doing that for you anyway?"

He nodded. "When you tell me you need something, I have Eric handle it. But it's quicker for me to just approve a request rather than hear it out and make arrangements for it. Carla will be able to take care of that for you and me."

Now I felt insulted. "Well damn, I'm sorry I'm such an *inconvenience* for you. If only there were some way I could just do all of that shit *myself*," I said sarcastically.

He tapped the side of my mouth with his two fingers. "Watch your mouth. We're taking this one step at a time. We'll see how you do with her first before I start giving you more freedoms. Let her help you."

I groaned. "I don't need help. I need you to leave so I can go back to sleep." And with that, I flopped my head back into the pillow, officially ready to go back to ignoring him again. But his hand cracked across my ass hard enough for me to jolt and nearly shriek before he covered my mouth with his lips. The kiss was deep and all-consuming, an angry farewell of passion and obsession.

When he released me, I had to remind my heart to chill the fuck out while my ass attempted to recover. "Do yourself a favor and don't cause any trouble."

"You like it when I cause trouble," I retorted.

He smirked as he stood, towering over me with his massive form. "Only when I'm here so I can beat your ass back into submission. But until then, be good. I'll be back soon."

"Have fun murdering people," I mumbled, rubbing the pulsing flesh of my ass.

"Always!" he called back cheerfully as he grabbed his duffle bag and walked out the door, closing it softly behind him.

"Psycho," I murmured to myself as I closed my eyes and managed to snooze another hour and a half before Paolo's screams interrupted my dreams again, signaling my time to sleep in was officially over.

After a quick breakfast, Camaro and I trained in my gym for the next three hours until it was almost noon. I took a quick shower and dressed in a

long black and white sundress with sleeves that nearly reached my elbows. I was just about finished brushing out my annoyingly long, wet hair when Clive and Owen informed me the painters were waiting for me in my room. The two of them plus Camaro escorted me down the hall where four men were waiting, holding paint rollers and cans of paint.

It was weird to give them instructions for what I wanted, considering I rarely got to decide anything in my life, but it was also nice. I left them to their work to head down to the library for a while, intent on returning to my studies with human anatomy. But an hour later, I found myself bored and started to wander the library to see if maybe I had missed some new and exciting material as Darren so enthusiastically thought.

As I strolled, I found myself wandering in the fiction section until I came across a familiar book. The title *Lord of the Flies* was printed out on the spine of the old paperback that looked like it hadn't been touched in ages. Fingering the edge, I pulled the book out, casually flipping through the old pages and stopping short when a small folded piece of notebook paper wedged into the spine caught my eyes.

My stomach began to warm as realization came over me that I just stumbled upon something I was probably not supposed to see. And if I wasn't supposed to see it, the cameras in the library would show that I had and then there would be consequences. The good news was the camera closest to me wasn't at the greatest angle to catch what I was doing. Fucking privacy was so goddamn hard to come by around here, especially when you were trying to do something that would raise suspicion.

Sitting down on the floor against the bookshelf, I opened the book and unfolded the note, pressing it against the pages as best it would fit. My stomach was already clenching as I began to read.

*My Dearest Children,*

*I know these words will never be enough to help you understand what I've done or why. And I'm sure by now, I have probably been gone for a very long time as I know the boys I've raised no longer find joy in reading their favorite books. But I imagine the hate and violence you've come to know so well has served its purpose, which is probably why you're even reading this. I have obviously failed you.*

*The Duvalls are not responsible for my death as I have regrettably led you to believe. I paid a man to shoot me in front of your father so that he could watch me die. And in return, I could watch his face to see if there was*

any love left in his eyes while I perished. I do not know if your father still loves me or if he ever really felt anything for me other than pure obsession, but I'm sure I will find out in the next several hours.

I don't want you to think I did this out of revenge because of your father's infidelity. I am not that petty. That was only a partial reason for what I've done. To be blunt, my sweets, your father is nothing short of a monster, and I can no longer stand by and watch him turn the three of you into his spitting image. I will not allow this cancer to grow any further.

The truth is, when I first met him, I was a homeless seventeen-year-old sex slave waiting to be sold in an auction, but I managed to do something I never thought possible. I convinced him to buy me. I thought it would be better to be purchased by someone I knew who would keep me alive, rather than someone who might find enjoyment in killing me. I did everything I could to make your father happy, and for a while, it worked out well for the both of us.

But about two years after Dominic was born, I noticed your father had already begun to lose interest in me. So when I started getting sick a few months later, I thought this would be the end of me. Months went by with no answer as to what was wrong with me until I was finally diagnosed with ovarian cancer – the curse of my mother's family. By then, it was already in an advanced stage, and I had maybe a few years left at best. It seemed your father's prayers to be rid of me were answered, and he wouldn't even have to lift a finger.

As I depleted over time, your father became more aggressive with the three of you. Knowing that I wouldn't be around much longer had him already preparing you to forget remorse so he wouldn't have three crying children to console when their mother was gone. After all the beatings, the torture, the so-called training and horrific teachings, you cannot expect a mother to witness the destruction of her own children and do nothing. I couldn't take it anymore. It was only a matter of time before the three of you would be wielding the knives and pulling the trigger yourselves. It broke my heart knowing what I would be leaving behind, so I had to do something.

I thought about killing your father myself several times, and almost did once, but it wouldn't have been enough. Someone would eventually replace him, and the three of you would still grow up to be the same. Knowing the strength of your father's ego, there was only one thing I could do to bring him down. I had to start a war.

*If I were killed before my time, Warren would have no choice but to avenge the death of his wife. Weakness was not afforded in his life and to take anything from him, whether he held value to it or not, was an insult that demanded retaliation. I found myself in the perfect position. I wanted out of this life. I was unhappy, afraid, unloved, and utterly helpless to everything around me. I was already wasting away, so I decided to make use of my impending death.*

*So, I made plans to have myself killed before your father, to blame my slaying on the Duvalls, one of Triguard's many enemies who were honestly no better than we were. And in doing so, I hoped to start the war of the century so that Warren would be killed, his empire would fall, and the three of you would finally be free of him to grow into something more than just the darkness of this world. If there was one thing I could always count on, it was that he would do everything in his power to keep the three of you safe. My hope is that he sends you away for a while until the violence is over and he is finally gone from your lives. I hope you will be able to outgrow his cruel influence.*

*After all the darkness you've suffered through, I sincerely hope you were still able to find the light, to see beyond the green of the money, the red of the blood, and the black of the power that comes with it all. I cling to the hope that my sacrifice for you will not be in vain. That you will be strong enough to see past your pain, that you will be free of the dark influences of your father, find forgiveness for the deception of your mother, and that after everything you've seen and done, you turned out to be the wonderful young men I'd always dreamed you'd be.*

*I will go to my grave with those hopes in my heart.*

*Know that even in death, I will still love you from the clouds.*

*All my love,*

*Your mother, Diana.*

I sat there in silence for a long time after reading that. I didn't know what to think. My heart was racing in my chest with the truth no one likely knew. It was clear Darren had never seen this before, and I doubted anyone else had. She'd left it in Darren's favorite book expecting him to find it, but it looks like her intentions backfired. Not only had Darren obviously not read her note, he never picked up the book again, likely because instead of Warren sending his children away like she hoped, they were instead busy learning warfare from him and defending their family honor. Her plan did

the exact opposite. It forced Darren and his brothers right into the center of the fight, forcing them to learn faster, grow stronger, and strike harder. She accelerated their training. And destroyed the wrong family in the process.

What a colossal fuckup.

I couldn't really blame her, though. As a mother, I understood her intentions, but even sometimes mother bears led their cubs to tragedy.

Starting a war was brilliant as long as you didn't get caught in the crossfires. But in order to kill two birds with one stone, you had to have perfect aim as well as perfect timing. Darren's mother wasn't able to stick around long enough to see her plan through; she couldn't be there to make sure the dominos fell correctly.

But I could.

I could see it through. I had allies outside now. I had skills Diana didn't have. And I had more time than she did. She might not have been able to prevent her sons from becoming monsters like their father, but I could be the one to finish what she started.

I couldn't save her sons, but I could stop them from recreating the cycle.

Folding the note back up, I placed it in the side of my bra and stood to put the book back in its place. I decided maybe it wasn't best for Darren to read that note just yet. I didn't need him thinking I'd suddenly reached new inspiration.

I found it slightly helpful to understand Darren's philosophy of life, but I still disagreed. Humans could do horrible, evil things because they were capable, yes, but they were also capable of good and wonderful things. Yet as I walked back down the aisles, I couldn't help but notice the irony. Here I was, fighting for the good in people, defending a noble humanity, yet I was working just as hard to join the ones who wanted to destroy it so I could destroy them. I hated that I couldn't destroy evil with good, that I couldn't just summon sympathy to materialize in Darren's heart. I couldn't plant a seed in his brain and force him to grow a conscience or spoon-feed him the taste of guilt and remorse. He was so very much like a vicious dog that had been trained to fight, trained to destroy and maim and win at all costs. You couldn't redeem a dog like that. You had to put them down even though it wasn't their fault. Darren might have been an innocent child once, even if he didn't believe that, but he was an adult now. He knew there were consequences to his actions. And I was one of them.

If I wanted to bring Darren down, I wouldn't be able to do it by simply changing his mind with good intentions and love. The very idea was laughable. No. I would have to be just as bad as him. Just as manipulative. Just as ruthless. Just as dirty. Because in this world, you had to fight smart, not fair. He'd taught me that much at least.

After hiding the note in a small bag containing my paint supplies, I decided I needed some fresh air, so I took Camaro for a walk through the trees, using the time to gather my thoughts and reflect on the best course of action. Although it was increasingly difficult to concentrate with Camaro running all over the damn place and almost running into me several times.

Irritated, I whistled for her since she was currently harassing a squirrel in a tree, her barking annoying the fuck out of me. She quickly raced her way back over as I turned around to head back toward the house. As we came to the bridge that crossed the stream, of course a damn fish would be making its way along the water, catching Camaro's attention. She immediately pranced toward the stream, barking at the fish and walking back and forth along the bank.

"Don't you dare jump in there," I warned her as she leaned forward on her front paws. "Camaro, no!"

Turning her nose back to me and then back to the fish, she thankfully decided to abandon her pursuit of the fish, and instead ran and jumped at me with her dirty paws. Her claws not only managed to soil my outfit, but she also scratched the shit out of my damn forearm.

"Mmm ... thanks, girl. Much appreciated," I said as I wiped the dirt off my sundress and skin. She just barked at me with that little happy smile of hers, her tongue hanging out on one side of her mouth.

Shaking my head, we continued out of the woods and back toward the house, but as we came closer, I noticed the figure of a woman standing on the patio. She stood in a skintight light gray dress with black stiletto heels that complemented her already long skinny legs. Her chocolate brown hair curled just above her shoulders while red manicured nails clung to her hips as she stared me down. As I got closer, she appeared to be in her mid-to-late forties. She had a pretty face, but the stern look in her dark eyes revealed all I needed to know. Camaro immediately growled at her, forcing me to hush her objection away.

"Well, you must be Mrs. Davis," she said with a huff as she looked me up and down with a critical glance. I've never heard someone sound so

unimpressed in my life.

“Carla, I’m guessing?”

She nodded. “Your painters are finished with the room, but it will need to dry overnight. The movers will be here tomorrow at eleven a.m. to deliver the furniture and any other materials you’ve requested.”

“Okay, great. Thanks.”

“Will there be anything else you need at the moment?”

I shook my head. I could already smell resentment all over this one. “Nope. I’m good thanks.”

“Fabulous,” she said, sounding almost unsurprised. But as her eyes returned to my dress, her gaze became incredibly focused. “There’s dirt on your dress. I suggest you clean up before dinner.”

My eyes gave her all the response required. *Bitch?*

“Well, if the staff can get bloodstains out, I’m sure they won’t have any trouble with a little dirt. Enjoy the rest of your night, Carla,” I countered and walked past her into the house with Camaro.

Great, I was going to have to deal with another bitch in my life. Just fucking perfect.

After checking the paint job of the room, I was satisfied with the way the colors looked in the lighting. I’d chosen a soft gray to complement a sort of mauve color that I thought meshed pretty well. I didn’t want anything too loud in this room. I needed something calming. A place where I could just relax. As I returned to Darren’s room, the room that I now shared with him, it came to my attention I now had yet another set of eyes on me.

I didn’t know Darren’s reasons, but I knew Carla wasn’t here just to spy on me.

*I felt my heart still in my chest.*

*The door was wide open. A gaping hole out of this sullen room had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and I found myself rooted to the floor, my feet unsure of their next move.*

*It was open. It was never open. Not like this.*

*What do I do?*

*Is this a test?*

*Do I leave? Am I allowed to now?*

*Why else would the door be open?*

*I could feel my body shiver under my sheath dress as my mind deliberated back and forth over the next course of action. Surely, the door would not be left open if I wasn't allowed to leave, right?*

*Fear raced through my veins at the idea of possibly breaking the rules. What if it was a trick?*

*But another sinful idea crept into my mind. Maybe it was a reward. Maybe it was finally the break I deserved. Heat blossomed across my face at the thought of feeling the sunlight on my skin again and enjoying natural warmth instead of the deadly chill of this room that I hated so much.*

*Maybe I could leave for just a moment. Maybe that was okay. The door was open. Why else would it be open? It had to mean something.*

*My knees wobbled with each step, my bare feet barely sliding along the carpet to propel me forward. My shoulders tightened, preparing for disappointment when I finally reached the doorway and poked my head through.*

*My watery eyes scanned the entire basement, noticing the lights were off but finding no one, not even a guard, and it only made my heart beat faster.*



*But the bright natural light cascading down the stairs was a beacon I couldn't ignore. Light.*

*With aching muscles sore from the night before, I slowly made my way toward the stairs, my feet as silent as my breath. I didn't even dare exhale.*

*When my fingers finally clutched the stair railing, I shivered again and looked up, the light so bright it was blinding. But I was so close. So close to getting away from that wretched basement. I never wanted to set foot down here again.*

*But when the sun finally touched my skin, time suddenly stopped. A warmth I hadn't felt in so long cloaked my entire body with a sense of relief so unfamiliar I almost rejected it. My bones absorbed the sunlight like it was starved for it, my mind finally capturing a moment of peace and unsanctioned bliss.*

*It was only when I moved to the first step did I hear his voice.*

*"Where are you going, Jaden?"*

*Whatever breath I was holding before, I instantly choked on it as all the hope I had just felt instantly drained from my heart. Terror caved its way into my chest, tearing a hole through me and making my tremors so much worse. I didn't even have the courage to turn around and face him.*

*"The door ... it was open. I ... I thought ..."*

*"You thought what? That you could leave? Did I give you permission to leave that room?"*

*"No."*

*With each step he took toward me, my shoulders hunched even more, my body's now piss-poor response at defending itself. My fingers gripped the railing so hard my knuckles turned white while my nails left little indents. Knots spiked in my stomach like thorns growing from a bush, curling and twisting until the thorns finally reached my fragmented heart. The absolute terror I felt for what Darren would do to me for defying him like this had me wanting to cripple at his feet, to turn into a tiny ball and hide from him forever. So I gripped the railing even tighter to keep my knees from buckling.*

*I'd known fear for a long time. Fear of upsetting him. Fear of disappointing him. Fear of disobeying him. It's what kept me safe. But terror? That was what came after. Terror was immobilizing and all consuming. You couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. The only thing you felt was the ice coursing through your veins as you waited for the*

horror to exact itself and come for you. And when it did, recovery was hard to come by.

*“Look at me, Jaden.”*

*It was the last thing I wanted to do.*

*It hurt just to crane my neck, but I forced myself to move, doing my best to ignore the tremors in my body as I faced him. Even standing on one step higher, he was still taller than me, the physicality of our dynamic a constant reminder of the hopelessness that was my life. There was no escaping him, not even from that wretched room.*

*When my eyes found the courage to meet his, I regretted it. The deep bottomless pools of dark ocean had me gripping the stairwell tight enough I thought my knuckles would break through my skin. That hard glare with a glint of eager anticipation, a warning of what was to come, brought tears to my eyes, but I wouldn't let them fall. Not yet. He'd want to savor them.*

*Darren lifted his hand to softly stroke his finger down the side of my cheek as a gentle, innocent smile painted across his lips. A lie. I hated when he played with me like this – the whole cat and mouse thing, drawing it out cruelly. He lived for moments like this with me.*

*It was what turned him on.*

*And because of that, I could already feel the wetness growing between my legs, preparing for the onslaught I was sure would come.*

*The finger trailing my cheek moved along my jawline until Darren grasped my chin and held it tight.*

*“I want you to remember one thing here, Jaden,” he said smoothly, his eyes boring down at me. I searched them for mercy, pleading internally for forgiveness as he kissed me on the forehead, but as always, I found none. “You brought this on yourself.”*

*With those final words, Darren roughly grabbed a fistful of my hair on the back of my head and dragged me back into the room.*

*The beating I received then almost rivaled my time with him in the jail cell. Only this time, he smiled through it all, an image I will never forget. Between his belt, fists, and cock, by the time he was done, my body was one giant bruise. My bones might not have been broken this time, but as I laid on my side in my cage, alone, shivering in the dark, my spirit finally was. I was nothing, less than nothing. I didn't even have the strength to cry anymore, the tears long dried down my face.*

*Finally closing my eyes, it was the first time I'd actually hoped I would never open them again.*

*Maybe then I could finally see my dad.*

Bursting from my bed, I screamed in fury, my vocal cords giving breath to the agony that particular memory brought me. Camaro rose from her bed barking up a storm and raced toward me as I shook with panic, gripping the sheets in hopes of finding ground while hurried footsteps rushed down the hall. The bedroom door was instantly ripped open, Clive and Owen pushing inside with their guns drawn, both shirtless and barefoot, wearing the long black sweatpants they slept in. Four more guards raced up behind them, their guns raised as they entered the room.

But when Clive and Owen saw me sitting in the middle of the bed, my chest heaving and my eyes filled with tears, they sighed with relief and lowered their weapons, dismissing the other guards as a false alarm.

"Count to ten, Mrs. Davis," Clive said as he took a few steps toward me, his eyes scanning my face.

"I'm fine," I replied as I focused on taking slower breaths. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, it read 3:00 a.m. I grimaced and reached down to pet Camaro so she would calm down. She eventually licked my face when she was satisfied that I was safe and went back to her bed.

Falling back into the pillow, I looked up at the ceiling, doing my best to withhold the tears that wanted to fall down my cheeks. And when it became too difficult, I started to count. Slowly, after each number, I filled my lungs with air, reminding myself there was no physical pain, and I could breathe. I was fine. I was not trapped down there again. And when I finally got to ten, my tremors had lessened.

"I'm okay," I said aloud, knowing my guards were waiting for the right signs to leave me alone again.

"Are you sure?" Owen asked, the concern in his voice a little touching.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm good now. Thanks."

"We'll have Sid here in the morning," Clive added before they left.

Good. I needed to talk to that shit bag anyway.

It wasn't until after ten a.m. that Sid eventually showed up at the house. I never went back to sleep, so of course I was exhausted and moody, but I let him do his thing so I could get to the real reason I wanted to talk to him.

"Well, hello, Mrs. Davis," Sid said as he joined me in Darren's bedroom, taking a seat on the couch across from me. I narrowed my gaze at

him in annoyance.

“It would be a miracle if just *one* of you would call me by my first name.”

“You know I don’t make the rules,” he replied with a shrug.

“I won’t tell if you won’t tell.”

Sid brushed me off. “Let’s get to the point of my visit. I understand your nightmares have worsened recently?”

“What else is new?” I replied.

“I suppose nothing?” he said. “How was the honeymoon?”

I eyeballed him suspiciously. “Darren didn’t tell you?”

“All he tells me are his side of things.”

*Oh, how wise.*

I’d never clenched my jaw so hard. “Well, after a great time of cruising along the coast of the Mediterranean on his yacht, visiting Spain, France, and Italy, my *wonderful* new husband decided to end our amazing honeymoon with a sex slave auction. And then after I destroyed our hotel room together in a classic fit of rage, we spent the following morning fighting for our lives in a massive gun fight against like twenty people. I almost got kidnapped, shot three people in the head, and then I blew up a car. Now analyze that monstrosity.”

Sid looked exhausted already.

He sighed a long deep breath, his shoulders haunching before he relaxed them and looked me in the eye. “Let’s talk about the auction. How well did you handle it?”

I raised a brow. “Maybe you missed the part where I said I destroyed our hotel room?”

“I mean during the auction.”

I was silent for a moment, trying to articulate what I could and couldn’t, but most of it I’d already revealed to Darren, so it couldn’t hurt me further now.

“I felt betrayed.”

“Why?”

I felt the heat coursing through my veins all over again at the memory of that night. God, I wanted to murder so many people then.

“Because he knows,” I practically growled. “He knows how much I hate that about him, and he shoved it right in my fucking face and told me to like

it. I've taken a lot from him, and I know when I deserve my due, but this ... I just can't explain it."

Sid nodded, but like the dumbass I was, I continued.

"And everything had been going so well. I'd gotten him to laugh and smile. We actually had fun touring the countries and just being newlyweds. I tried *so hard* to show him a different side of things, how nice they could be without the violence and darkness of his world, but he just can't resist showing me how much of a monster he really is. And so, he purposely brought me back to my old reality."

Sid looked confused. "What old reality?"

"The one where I hate him again. He said he missed that."

Sid sat up straighter, eyeballing me carefully as if I had just grown a second head.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just a little surprised is all."

"At what?"

Sid shook his head again as if to wave me off. "That man's behavior just fascinates me."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Yes, he mentioned that actually. He said you have an entire file on him."

"I've been studying him for a long time," he said with a nod.

"Any useful conclusions?" I asked, hopeful.

Sid was quiet for a moment before he finally answered. "He's just a manifestation of all the right tendencies and behaviors to create the perfect psychopath."

I felt my eyes widen. "So he is a diagnosed psychopath?"

"Not necessarily. Psychopaths are born. Darren was *made* into the person he is. But he just had all the right molding to ensure perfection."

Now I was confused. "How is he perfect?"

Sid sighed as if he knew he'd just opened a giant can of worms, but he had to know Darren's room didn't have any recording cameras in it. It was the only room in the house that didn't. Only one person in this house was allowed his privacy.

"Darren essentially maintains all the benefits of a psychopath and none of the faults. He was taught from a very young age to reject emotions that would hold him back like guilt and sympathy, but that doesn't mean he's incapable of feeling them, just that he's strong enough to ignore them.

Almost like a switch he can just turn on and off. Which is the only explanation I have for why he sometimes feels sympathy for you.”

“You think he actually sympathizes with me?”

“I said he feels it, not that he acts on it.”

I scowled. “So what’s your explanation then for why he told me he missed me hating him?”

He shrugged. “Darren loves conflict. He’s a conqueror. I thought you had that figured out by now.”

“But I give him conflict all the time! I strategically taunt him into fighting me whenever I can tell he needs it, which is incredibly frequent!”

“He knows the difference, Jaden. So it looks like he took the steps to make your behavior toward him more authentic.”

“But I thought that was what he wanted! I gave him all my devotion and affection, I challenged him and submitted when he wanted, I let him mold me exactly the way he wanted and never complained. Why is that suddenly no longer enough?”

“Because it clearly didn’t work,” Sid replied bluntly.

“What do you mean it didn’t work?!”

“You don’t love him.”

That immediately stunned me into silence.

I’d never even considered love as a factor in any of this. Why did a man who couldn’t concern himself with sympathy or guilt be so concerned with something as inconsequential as love? Not to mention it wasn’t as if he was trying that hard to win my affection in a way that would inspire real love. The end of our honeymoon had ensured that.

Especially now that I knew Jason was alive and had a plan.

“Well, no shit,” I responded boldly. “Have you seen my life lately? It’s not exactly a romance novel here.”

Sid nodded. “As justified as you are in your feelings, it doesn’t mean he won’t stop trying until he gets what he wants.”

“Why does he want me to love him so badly?”

“Because it’s the only way he may ever be able to trust you to willingly stay with him.”

I felt the crushing weight of the most impossible outcome suddenly fall on my shoulders. The one thing I truly desired from Darren was his trust, and while I had a good portion of it, I knew I would never fully have it until

he knew I loved him. He wanted my love to ensure I would never try to leave him, and I wanted his trust to ensure that I could.

Except it was clear that Darren didn't understand love and what it was capable of. If only he knew what his mother had done *for love*.

"Love will not protect him from his fear of losing me, Sid. That's just foolish."

"Love is stronger than fear, Jaden. If your fear of him won't make you stay, then perhaps loving him will."

"Yes, love is stronger than fear," I agreed. "Love makes people do amazing things and terrible things. But it's not as binding as he thinks. Will is stronger. How else would battered women find the strength to leave the abusive husbands they still love?"

"I think your situation is a little more complicated than that, Jaden."

"But you have to admit the fault in his logic, Sid. Love is not always the be-all and end-all."

Sid narrowed his eyes at me. "Well, that's awfully final of you."

I shrugged. "To be fair and honest, he lost all chances of me ever loving him when he forced me to watch young girls dressed in scraps of lingerie being sold to disgusting, fat, old fucks and had the audacity to call it therapy. And as he's already stated, he wants me to hate him, not love him. At least that I can do."

Sid shook his head. "He wants you to hate him because hate walks a very fine line next to love. He's utilizing a new strategy, one that I imagine he is enjoying very much."

I stared Sid down, my rage intensifying with each second. "And I will crush that one just as I've done all the others."

I've had just about enough of Darren's little "strategies" to get me to fall for him.

Sid almost looked impressed, or maybe he just thought I was insane. "And that right there is exactly why he finds you so interesting. You are unrivaled in his game. Even when you thought you'd lost, you were only just starting over. And now, you're back to being an even match."

"Hard to have an even match when you're playing the dealer," I dejected. "God, this is so ridiculous."

"Think of your alternate option. You bore him, and then he disposes of you. We've been over this a thousand times. Everything we've ever

discussed has always been about your survival. I don't want to see you back in that basement just so he can reset you again."

The thought of the basement made my gut shrink with fear. I would burn this entire place down just to destroy one singular room in this house if I could.

"He does still have a few cards up his sleeve, you know. I'd hate to see him implant that ace while you are still clearly so unwilling," Sid added.

The basement instantly forgotten, I turned to sneer at him, knowing exactly what that so-called "ace" was. "You mean when he willingly hands me a hostage?"

I was bluffing the shit out of that one. I would never harm that child, but I didn't know if I would be able to love it either. But once it was born, Darren would surely use that child against me the same way he did my own family. And the kind of life it would have here? I couldn't let that happen. We would be trapped forever.

"Don't be stupid, Jaden. Your uterus is not a battlefield."

I gave him a dark look. "I beg to differ."

He rolled his eyes. "I think that's enough for today," he said and moved to stand.

"Sid, wait," I said, sitting up with the desire to broach a new subject. "Did you know Darren's parents before they died?"

Sid looked at me with that warning look in his eye. "I only knew his father for a few years before he died."

"What was he like from your perspective?"

Sid looked at me carefully, his eyes glazing over for just a second before he answered me. "He was without a doubt the cruelest man I've ever met."

My worst fears confirmed. "And his mother?"

"From what little I understand, her entire life was nothing but tragedy."



I stared down at the barely breathing Luca Ricci who was currently bleeding all over his pristinely white carpet. We'd been at this for hours already, and though I was enjoying the process, the desired outcome was not manifesting as quickly as I anticipated. Mario Ricci fled his court-ordered house arrest pending his criminal trial and is now MIA, and his piece of shit nephew was not being as helpful as he should be.

Matt was gonna be so pissed at me for fucking up his plan to marry Regina off to Luca, but this was honestly for the best. If she married into a family that saw me as an enemy, then that would only lead to more problems in the future. I was honestly doing him a favor.

"Luca, I'm only gonna give you five more minutes of rest before I move to the other hand," I warned. Slumped against the wall, Luca's eyes were half closed as his chest slowly expanded to take in strained breaths, his mutilated, bloody hand resting on the floor next to him. The removal of his fingernails had only gained me the date of when Mario likely fled. The removal of his pinky finger allotted me the country of where he might have fled to. A second finger narrowed it down to a few cities he might be in. A third gave me the name of another contact who might have more information. A fourth only gained me the threat of swift, bloody revenge from his family. And his thumb brought back the possibility that he would be somewhere well guarded.

Scott was currently rummaging through all of Luca's files in his computer while I wandered over to his bookshelf that housed plenty of family photos. Observing each one closely, I found myself lucky that some of the photos were of him as a child amongst family. And then I noticed the

same beach house appeared in two of the photos, Mario leaning against the railing with a cigar in his mouth.

I took the frame and walked back over to Luca, taking his jaw in my hand and squeezing just enough to wake him.

“Luca,” I snickered, “where is this beach house?”

His eyes glazed over the photo, recognition lifting his lids slightly as he groaned at the photo. I lightly tapped what was left of his bleeding palm, causing him to shriek with a jolt as his eyes suddenly focused on the photo. But all he did was stammer absolute nonsense.

Reaching for my Sig, I held it against his head, no longer amused by his refusal to cooperate. I did have a bride to get home to, and I was already two days behind.

“Luca, if you don’t answer my damn question, I’m gonna blow your fucking brains out all over the carpet. And then I’m gonna move on to your cousin Bella. You have five seconds.”

He started stuttering as I slowly started to count backward, but it was when I got to two that he finally found his voice.

“Porto Rotondo!” he cried out.

“Good boy,” I said and stood to hand Scott the photo. It only took him about five minutes to locate an address through Luca’s files. And just like that, we had our next heading.

I left Luca with two bullets in his head, allowing him to rot with his two bodyguards before we eventually pulled the gas line and lit a candle as we left. By the time we turned down the next street, the private residence of Luca Ricci was nothing but fire and rubble.

Checking my phone, I found a text from Clive informing me Jaden had another bad nightmare in the middle of the night that woke them up. They called Sid to evaluate her and all was well.

It was fucked up, but while Jaden had reoccurring nightmares of her time in the basement with me, I happened to consider them some of my fondest memories.

God, I was an evil, sick fuck.

“Let’s take care of Mario now while it’s still daylight. I’m suddenly eager to get home to torture my wife.”

It took us about an hour to fly the jet from Fuimicino to Porto Rotondo and another thirty-minute drive from the rental car that was waiting for us at the airport. Mario's private beach house was pretty well secluded on the edge of the giant island off the coast of Italy, much of the property barricaded by private fencing, palm trees, and bushes. But as we carefully breached the property, scouting every inch that we could see, there was a noticeable lack of patrolling bodies. There wasn't even anyone passing through the windows.

"I don't see a goddamn soul," Scott said as he watched through his binoculars.

I shrugged. "Maybe there wasn't anyone left after what happened in Rome."

"Maybe."

Guns drawn, we quietly made our way across the lawn of the property, stopping at the back door to find the handle unlocked. My gut was already not liking the way this was turning out. One silent step at a time, we scoured through the quiet house, waiting for a sign of anything alive, and we got our answers when we made it into the living room.

Three men, likely guards, were dead on the ground in one massive pool of blood, their bodies riddled with bullet holes. And just a few feet away from them was Mario Ricci, or what was left of Mario Ricci. His body was nothing but charred ash, the disgusting smell of burnt flesh and gasoline permeating the air. But the most disturbing part wasn't the dead bodies laid out for me to find, it was the handwritten note that had been carved into the wall above Mario's head.

*One step ahead of you.*

I stared at the writing in absolute disbelief. Not only had some fucking asshole completely stolen my revenge, but they deliberately dangled it right in front of me. Who in the actual fuck had the balls to deliberately taunt me? Did they even know who they *thought* they were a step ahead of?

Jesus, my head was swimming with so many what-the-fucks, I couldn't keep up with them.

"Looks like he's been dead for maybe two hours," Scott said as he examined Mario.

Two hours? I missed this fucker by a span of two hours? HOW?

"There has to be security footage somewhere," I said.

But there wasn't. Everything had been scrubbed. The cameras were demolished, the system completely wiped – not a trace of my revenge thief in sight.

I had no idea what to make of it. It was unprecedented. Even Scott was at a loss for a possible lead.

Mario had his own set of enemies just as I did, but word had gotten around that I'd been hunting him, so no one would be stupid enough to interfere like this with the clear purpose of sending me a message. Did they only kill Mario because I wanted him dead? Or were they just killing two birds with one stone? All these fucking questions and no one to torture for answers. I had an obstructionist on my hands, and I needed to know who it was. This did not need to become a future problem.

After scrubbing the place clean of ourselves, we fled the house, careful not to be seen as we drove back to the jet. I played potential matches in my head over and over again, trying to find the fuck who would dare step between me and my targets. But no one came to mind. No one was that capable or would even think of such an agenda. It had to be someone new, someone who didn't know better – which meant it was time to step back into the light and attract some new attention. They'd want to step out of the shadows at some point, and I was going to give them that opportunity.

I was just about to finish the season finale of *The Fall* when Carla, Clive, and Owen walked into my newly decorated J-Den. It'd been finished this morning as six men carried all of the furniture, curtains, and decorations I'd selected and placed them where I'd instructed. The whole thing was done in two hours, my electronics hooked up, lights plugged in, and my ass planted on my comfy light gray square sectional with a million accented throw pillows. I was officially surrounded by a room of soft grays and mauves with strings of lights dangling from the wall, giving the room that soft twinkly look I secretly loved. I had mirrors mounted on every wall, most of them obviously decorative, but they had been strategically placed to prevent Darren or anyone else from sneaking up on me from any angle. Even Camaro was enjoying her new squishy bed that she'd barely left, chewing on a new toy I'd picked out for her.

So when my new haven was breached with unwelcome intruders, I couldn't help but scowl at them. I was still trying to mull over my conversation with Sid, and I didn't want to deal with anyone.

"Darren would like to speak to you," Carla said as she handed me the phone.

I took the phone, hit the End button, and plopped it on the mirrored coffee table in front of me before returning my focus back onto the screen in front of me.

Carla actually gasped to the point where I almost laughed.

"How could you do that?" she nearly shrieked. "Call him back right now and apologize!"

Fuck, that made me giggle. “I think I’ll pass. He’s only calling to annoy me anyway.”

“I don’t care! Call him back!”

I stood and headed toward the bathroom, giving them my backside as my way of dismissing them. A bath sounded better than dealing with them.

“Listen here, you ungrateful little whore. He does all this for you, and you turn around and disrespect him like that? That’s not how a wife—”

I turned and decked her right in the mouth before she had a chance to even finish her sentence. Her ass hit the floor before Camaro was on her feet, growling at her in front of me, before Clive and Owen even had a chance to react, their stunned faces an image I would never forget. I didn’t know this woman very well, but I was going to lay down the boundaries immediately before she got too high for this position that she had been so eloquently gifted.

“Listen closely, Carla, because I’m only gonna say this once,” I said as I stood over her. “Be very careful with what you say around me. I don’t know who the fuck you think I am, but shit like that won’t fly with me. Do your job, mind your business, and stay the fuck out of my marriage, and *maybe* I’ll tolerate you. Got it?”

Carla’s hand was still covering the lips that I could see were already swelling and bleeding down her chin. That would be *the last time* I allow someone who didn’t know me to call me a whore and lecture me about Darren. They didn’t know a goddamn thing about me and him and what he’d put me through, so I wasn’t going to give them even a moment of breathing time to spew shit they knew nothing about.

When I raised an eyebrow after not getting the acknowledgment I expected from her, she tilted her gaze back to Clive and Owen in confusion.

“They’re not going to help you,” I answered for her. “The most they’ll do is tell Darren what happened, and you’ll have to explain to him what you did to deserve that kind of reaction from me. It’s not a conversation I would look forward to, but it’s one you can avoid in the future if you remember to keep your ill-informed opinions about my life to yourself. Now do you understand?”

Clive and Owen basically gave her a shrug-nod to confirm the truth of my words, giving her the means to look back and regard me, her expression one of regret and worry.

“Okay, fine. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” she muttered.

“Great,” I said with a smile as I straightened my spine. “Then we’ll get along just fine. Now I’m going to go take a bath because I have this gut feeling that Darren was going to tell me he’s on his way home. So don’t worry, I’ll be ready by the time he gets here.”

Clive smirked at me, giving me a very subtle nod before he helped Carla up and escorted her out of the room. Clive and I might have our power struggles and differences, but he still respected by ability to keep people from seeing me as a doormat. I had a new title now, and I was not going to allow anyone to bully me ever again.

I took a bath in my old bathroom, still preferring the feminine touch in there as a place that was sort of mine before Darren moved me completely to his room. Once I finished, I changed and made myself presentable in our shared bedroom and headed for the door to wait for him out on the patio. But as soon as I opened the bedroom door, Darren was already barreling through it, lifting me up by my waist and slamming me down on the bed in one long stride.

He had his mouth on my clit before I even had a chance to address him, his tongue licking up and down my slit, lapping and sucking like a man starved. With each delicious stroke of his tongue, all I could do was spread my knees as wide as my body would allow to grant him as much access to me as he demanded. My conditioned willingness to sate Darren’s needs was unabashed in light of our honeymoon or maybe I was still conscious of selecting my battles. Sex was never a battle I would win, and in this particular case, I wasn’t going to argue. Because his tongue was a goddamn Olympian, and the orgasm that erupted from my body was his gold fucking medal.

I hadn’t even had a chance to catch my breath before his cock was already thrusting inside me, my body bending in pleasure and agony under him while he ripped the top of my dress to fondle my breasts. And just like that, he became the machine I’d always known him to be, his focus narrowed on a singular mission: to now punish me for ignoring him and rewarding himself for it. I had hoped the success of his murder spree and his denied access to me would arouse a quick aggressive fuck so I wouldn’t have to spend the rest of the night restricted to our bed so I could entertain him.

My second orgasm came before I was even ready for it, my body vibrating with ecstasy as Darren took everything he wanted from me and

more, my core pulsing around his cock until he couldn't hold back anymore and came inside me.

When it was over and I was left still gasping for breath, he pulled out, turned my body to the side and smacked my ass so hard I jolted with a shriek, the pain expanding all the way up my spine and nearly bringing tears to my eyes.

"That's what you get for hanging up on me, you little brat," he snarled and then left me there to head into the bathroom to clean himself up. I just laid there in fury while my entire backside pulsed with heat and skin-tight agony.

*Holy fuck, that really hurt. Asshole.*

When he eventually came back, he barely looked at me before he spoke.

"Go pack your things. We're leaving for Vegas in three hours." And then he started for the door.

That caused me to stand. "Wait, what? We just got back. *You* literally just got back."

"And?" He raised a brow, his tone suggesting a fight would not be worth it.

I sighed in defeat. Sex had clearly not helped in relieving his obvious shitty mood, which meant something had gone wrong in Italy. *Fuck.*

"How many days should I pack for?"

"Three," he said before heading out and shutting the door behind him.

And three hours later, we were back on that goddamn plane, Darren to my left texting on his phone, Camaro at my feet, and Clive, Owen, Scott, and Carla in the back while I stared blankly out the window. Of course, I had no idea why we were suddenly going to Vegas or what the fuck would be waiting for us there. I wasn't looking forward to seeing Dominic, so hopefully Darren would keep me at a distance.

About thirty minutes later, Darren's phone rang, causing him to curse under his breath before excusing himself into the private bedroom in the back. As soon as the door closed, Scott stood from his seat to come and sit next to me.

"Full disclosure?" he said as he looked at me. "Try not to piss him off for the next couple of days. Save your ass some skin."

"I kind of picked up on that, thanks," I said, only slightly appreciative of Scott's concern. "You wanna tell me what went wrong in Italy?"



Scott held his silence for a moment before he gave me a very serious look. “You know that Darren has enemies. What we don’t know is which one is brazenly stupid enough to fuck with him.”

Hmmm ... an adversary with balls? How intriguing.

“So that makes Vegas, what? A hunting ground?”

Scott smirked at me. “You’re a sharp girl, Jaden. Keep it that way until we get back. You’re gonna experience a lot of shit in Vegas that you won’t like. But you’re gonna want to stay ahead of the game. Don’t get sidetracked. You got it?”

I seriously loved how absolutely vague Scott was being. Why couldn’t he just come out and tell me what he wanted to me know instead of making me rely on these stupid subtle hints? What kind of communication was that?

“Sure,” I replied. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Scott nodded and went back to his seat. Ten minutes later, Darren came back from his phone call, the tension he’d stepped out with earlier slightly dissipated. It didn’t stop me from continuing to ignore him, though.

As soon as I had the privacy of the room, I answered the phone holding it at least an inch away from my ear.

“YOU FUCKING KILLED LUCA RICCI, DIDN’T YOU!” Matt screamed from the other end. I knew he’d be pissed I’d fucked up his negotiations to pawn off Regina to Ricci, but it just wasn’t in the cards this time.

“Technically, he got himself killed by refusing to cooperate. But you can consider it payback for Regina. She tries to kill my wife, and her future fiancé pays the price. We’re even now.”

“GODDAMMIT, DARREN! I had other deals going on with him besides my stupid bitch cousin!”

“Yeah, I saw the plans for those deals on his computer. He was going to fuck you over, Matt. I did you a favor, so you’re welcome.”

“Oh, Jesus, what the fuck’s the matter with you, huh? Why can’t you avoid meddling in my shit for once!”

“Because A, your shit just so happens to be intertwined with my shit. That’s what happens when you share the same clientele. And B, if you had better control over your stupid bitch cousin, none of this would even matter.”

“Well, maybe you need to start making some new friends then. It wasn’t enough to kill Mario, so you just had to go after Luca, too?”

“Luca knew where Mario was. And I didn’t kill Mario.”

That gave Matt pause. “The fuck you mean you didn’t kill Mario?”

“He was already dead when I found him, along with his guards.”

“By who?”

“I have no fucking idea, but whoever it was, they left me a very personal message to let me know that they are a step ahead of me. I missed them by two hours.”

“Shit,” Matt murmured.

“I’m on my way to Vegas with Jaden right now. I want to see if there’s anyone new in the neighborhood. See who might want to finally step into the spotlight.”

“Yeah, well, why don’t you find Regina a new fucking fiancé while you’re at it.”

“Maybe I will. Fuck, maybe I’ll turn an enemy into an ally. You know anything can happen in Vegas.”

“Yeah, especially when *you’re* in Vegas.”

“Especially because I’m finally going to take Holden up on his offer and visit his fight club to see if it’s worth my investment.”

Matt groaned. “He’s been up my ass about that damn club too. Fucker calls me like every other week.”

“Dom tells me the crowd size grows every time he attends a fight. He’s even made some money on the bets. Why don’t you meet me there? We can hunt for my potential new enemy and Regina’s new fiancé at the same time.”

Matt was quiet as he considered my proposal. “You cost me some serious contracts, you know.”

“Your cousin almost cost me a wife,” I reminded him. “Come on, you can bring Kayla, and the girls will stay occupied while we handle business.”

“You should know Regina is in Vegas right now.”

Now that set my mood back a pinch. “The fuck for?”

“I sent her away for what she pulled with Jaden. She tried to deny it, said she didn’t know there was X in the bottle, just thought it was good pain meds for her.”

“Why would Regina think she needed to give Jaden pain meds?” I asked.

“She said it was so her pussy could survive the honeymoon.”

I almost snickered at that. Almost.

“What a flattering excuse,” I sneered.

“Yeah, she’s crafty, that one. She’s with her strictest guards at one of my hotels with a very limited allowance. I hope she’s bored out of her fucking mind.”

I wasn’t amused. “Yes, boredom sounds like an equal punishment.”

“Hey, you said it yourself you already got your vengeance for that. We’re even.”

“Then come to Vegas, and we’ll keep it even.”

Matt sighed before he finally gave in. “Fine. I’ll see you there tomorrow.”

I hung up the phone and headed back to my seat. Matt would also unknowingly assist in bringing out anyone else to the crowd for me to inspect. I wanted all the cards on the table, all variables and possibilities of who the fuck would want to start shit with me.

As I passed Scott and Carla, I caught Carla reflecting on a cut on the inside of her slightly swollen lip from the pocket mirror she held in her hand. Clive and Owen had tried to brief me when I returned earlier, but I hadn’t given them much time. I wanted us in the air as soon as possible. So when I sat back down next to Jaden, I decided to get her side of the story first.

“What happened to Carla’s mouth?” I asked as Jaden continued to scratch between Camaro’s ears to keep her calm during the flight.

“The same thing that happens to me when I overstep my boundaries,” she replied casually, her eyes remaining on Camaro.

I suspected this would happen at some point. “What did she say to you?”

“She called me an ungrateful whore. She had more to say, but I cut her off before she could finish. I don’t think there will be any more problems from here on out, though.”

“Good,” I said and turned back to my seat.

Jaden raised a curious brow at me, her attention finally where it should be. “Good? That’s it? You’re not gonna reprimand me for hitting my staff?”

I shrugged. “It’s how I would have handled it.”

Actually, how I would have handled it would have been far worse, but for Jaden, it was acceptable. I’d come to terms with the fact that I couldn’t

fight all her battles. She was my wife now. She needed to demand her own respect, which meant she had to physically fight for it now. Her title as my wife gave her some standing, but she would still have to show everyone she was worthy of that title and why. I wanted the world to fear and respect her because of who she was, not because of who I was.

Unfortunately, she would likely struggle for a bit because of how small she was, but they would eventually learn that size wasn't all there was to her. Of that, I had no doubt.

As long as she didn't go on a murder spree, she could reprimand personal insults however she wanted. But God help anyone who insulted her in front of me.

Jaden regarded me suspiciously before she went back to petting Camaro. She was silent for the rest of the flight, which only lasted another thirty minutes. Vegas was only about an hour flight from San Diego.

When the plane landed, I escorted Jaden off with Camaro in tow. We got into the back seat of the short limo with Owen and Carla as Scott slid into the driver's seat and Clive sat in the front. Jaden kept quiet as Scott drove us to my casino just off the Strip, but her interest immediately piqued as we finally exited the desert and made our way into the city.

Her eyes lit up like gemstones as they flashed over all the showy attractions, the large intricate buildings and flamboyant designs capturing her attention like a little kid at a theme park. It was Europe all over again. Her thirst for adventure was beyond suitable, my need to ensure some of her happiness being stronger than my need to hide her away from the world. Lucky for her. She would never know how truly adorable she was to me. I wanted to keep that feeling alive for as long as I could.

Once Scott parked in front of the valet of my casino, I helped Jaden out of the car since her eyes never touched the ground as they took in everything around her, that was until they began to scrutinize the name of my casino.

"Audeamus?" she asked.

"It means *let us dare* in Latin," I answered.

She gave me a sly little smirk. "How incredibly clever and undeniably fitting for a casino."

Pulling her against my side, I led her into the lobby with Camaro at her other side, leaving the rest of the guards to grab our things and take them directly to our room. Whatever crowd had been in the lobby was now

parting with only a single glance from me, the eyes of the men looking anywhere else but at me while the women smiled at Camaro. Nearly everyone who frequented this casino knew who owned it, who managed it, and who enforced their debts. If they were smart, they did not want to get noticed here.

Jaden wasn't immune to the change in behavior as it seemed the crowd quieted down as we passed, some going so far as to leave the room entirely. It made me smile at their cowardice.

Entering the elevator, I punched in the private code and took Jaden straight to my suite on the top floor. The top four floors were closed off to the public. Dominic lived just one floor beneath mine and the other floors had several rooms available for special clients, guests, employees, or events. They were a special commodity when you did business with me or Dom in the city, a commodity most looked forward to, considering what those rooms allowed those clients to conceal should they need it.

Stepping out of the elevator, I escorted Jaden through the lobby, Camaro's claws and Jaden's heels clicking on the cream marble tiled floor as she continued to observe her new surroundings. She was met with a burgundy and gold interior, the bulletproof windows surrounding the entire suite giving way to the expansive view of Las Vegas.

"So this is where you stay when you travel here, huh?"

"Usually, yes," I answered as the rest of the guards brought in our things to place them in the bedroom.

Jaden's eyes continued to wander until they finally landed on the scenery outside, her feet taking her to the window while my gaze went directly to her reflection in the glass. Vegas didn't have shit on her.

Before I could join her, my phone buzzed in my jacket pocket, and I took it out to find Dom calling. This was going to be good.

"Dom," I answered.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming to Vegas?" he asked, a clear attitude already in play. Someone didn't like the idea that I was here.

"Oh, I thought that was what we were doing now. Just showing up whenever we wanted to without notice. That's not a problem for you, is it?" I was still pissed about him showing up at my home a day early just for him to get his ass kicked by Jaden. Here was another teachable moment.

"No," he began, "no, it's fine. I've got some news to share with you anyway so you might as well come down and hear it."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"All right, I'll be down in a minute."

I hung up and headed over to where Jaden was still standing as she pretended not to listen in to my conversation. She would take every advantage I gave her, which meant she would also be able to recognize them if someone was ever able to attack her again.

Standing at her back my hands went for her bare arms, stroking down the softness of her creamy white skin while the clean scent of her hair invaded my senses. She would never understand how goddamn intoxicating she was to me.

"Off already?" she asked unsurprised.

I was prepared to leave her here like I usually do, but maybe it was time for a change of pace.

"How about you come with me," I suggested.

That made her immediately turn in my arms, her eyes full of suspicion and distrust as she looked me up and down.

"Where to?"

"Just one floor below. Dominic's floor."

"Ah," she said slyly. "You sure about that?"

I took her hand in mine and started back toward the elevator, nodding at Scott, Clive, and Owen as they came around the corner to join us.

"Camaro, stay," I ordered as we all entered the elevator, the door closing just as Camaro sat back on her hind legs with a disappointed whine.

"Well, that's a first," Jaden said.

"I think you can live without your dog for a little while," I replied.

When the elevator doors opened to Dominic's floor, I stepped into the lobby, Jaden's hand still in mine, and led her into the living room only to stop a few steps short when I found Regina sitting on the couch. The moment her eyes found mine, they lit up with the type of slyness that had made me kill men in the past for.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I asked with a snarl.

"We got married," came Dom's blunt voice as he entered the room.

I swore I misheard him.

"You did what?"

Regina proudly lifted up her hand to reveal the giant diamond now glistening on the ring finger of her left hand. I turned back to Dominic, my rage competing against my ability to stay calm.

“When?”

“Two hours ago,” he answered.

“Why?”

Dominic gave me a sly little smirk that made me want to punch his fucking teeth in. “Because I can marry whoever the fuck I want. Just like you. That’s why.”

I shook my head at him, noting the obvious disapproval in his voice for my choice of bride. He was just still pissed that she kicked his ass. “Did your new wife tell you why she’s in Vegas and not at home with Matt?” I asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Extremely,” I answered, the anger in my voice becoming more and more evident. “Matt sent her away for sneaking a bottle of ecstasy disguised as aspirin into Jaden’s travel bag for our honeymoon. She was lucky she didn’t accidentally OD. And your new wife is incredibly lucky I am still allowing her to continue breathing.”

“That was an honest mistake.” Regina spoke up, an annoying tone of complete innocence in her voice.

“Shut your fucking lying mouth,” I told her. I was not about to allow her to pull that lie in front of me and everyone else here.

Dominic took a step toward me. “Yeah, well maybe Jaden is lucky I didn’t kill her after what happened in that octagon. Had it been anyone else, I would have slaughtered them, and you know it. You probably would have even helped.”

I let go of Jaden’s hand and took a menacing step toward my brother, grateful that he admitted to my suspicions. “Jaden paid for her part in that just as much as you did, and you fucking know it. Why are you still fixated on it?”

Dominic shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t enough for me.”

I was astounded. “So, what, you marry Regina to get back at me? Who the fuck does that? You want revenge on me because I didn’t back you enough for losing a fight against Jaden? Your pettiness is pathetic. You should know better than to pick a fight with someone you can’t win.”

“Then perhaps we’re even now,” he practically snarled at me. “You can’t stand Dan’s wife, so this will be nothing new for you. What’s done is done, so just accept it.”

“You realize that Matt’s oath to his uncle transfers to you now, right? Do you understand what that means? I won’t be able to protect you if you do something to invoke that shit.”

The glare in Dominic’s eyes was hard to miss. “I don’t need you to protect me. I can fucking handle my own.”

That was debatable. “Does Matt even know? What about Dan?”

“No, but we will tell them both at some point.”

“Well, best get prepared now because I invited Matt out here two hours ago. He’ll be here tomorrow.”

“It won’t matter anyway,” Regina interjected, standing in her silver stilettos and tiny white dress to saunter over to Dominic. “I made my choice. Matt will be happy to be rid of me.”

I felt my hands curl into fists as I glared down at Regina, the slight smug smile on her face telling me she knew exactly what she was doing. She was trouble, major fucking trouble, and my youngest brother just fucking married her. This was a huge problem. And I would not allow it to tear my family apart.

For the first time in a long time, I found myself in a situation I didn’t fucking like that I couldn’t fucking control. I had to figure out how to handle this.

“Fine, have your cunt of a wife. And when she drives you miserable, just remember that you did it to piss me off. You’ll find no sympathy from me when regret finally knocks you on your ass.”

Turning away, I grabbed Jaden and hauled her out of the lobby back into the elevator, Clive, Owen, and Scott moving quickly to keep up before the doors closed on them. All I was seeing was fucking red, and if I didn’t exorcise that demon quickly, I was going to destroy absolutely everything in my path.

When the elevator finally hit the bottom floor to the hotel lobby of the casino, I released Jaden’s stiff frame and stepped out with Scott. “Take Jaden back upstairs,” I said without turning back and left before the doors of the elevator were even closed behind me.

I was suddenly in the mood for a massacre.



Darren didn't return to the hotel that night, and he wasn't there when I woke up the next morning. After seeing Regina with Dominic, I wanted to throw up all over the floor and then murder both of them. Regina had finally proven that she had some intellect, marrying her way into a family that was wealthy, powerful, and incredibly dangerous. After what she pulled on our honeymoon, I knew Darren wanted her dead. I did too, but for far more reasons than that. The ecstasy was just the final nail in the coffin. But now that she was married to Dominic, Darren would be forced to endure her presence, as would I, which was punishment enough as it was.

I didn't understand Darren's concern over Matt's oath that now transferred to Dominic. He would have to avenge the death of his wife anyway to save face, so what difference did it make? Unless Darren knew something I didn't, which was 100% very likely.

So, I would have to tolerate Regina being a bitch again. So what? I'd dealt with far worse. She was nothing but a fucking fly in my air space. Enough swatting and they would eventually find something else to bother.

After taking a quick shower and changing, I headed out to the dining room area for breakfast, passing Clive and Owen as they lounged on the couch, sipping coffee and watching the news in the entertainment room with Camaro at their feet. Ignoring them for the scent of breakfast in the other room, I stopped at the doorway to find the back of a blond head sitting at the table. When she turned around at the sound of my entry, I couldn't help but smile in relief.

"Finally, you're up," Kayla said as she turned back around. "These waffles are to die for. You better get over here before I eat all of them."

*Well, she was chipper this morning.*

“What are you doing here?” I asked, trying not to sound too excited as I pulled out the chair next to her.

“Matt said we were going to Vegas. So now I’m in Vegas.”

“Naturally,” I commented sarcastically, reaching for the last waffle to place on my plate. “But how are you in our suite?”

“Matt dropped me off here about thirty minutes ago. Told me I was getting a little girls’ day with you.”

“This is news,” I said as I sprinkled some blueberries over my waffle and drizzled on the maple syrup.

Kayla nodded in agreement. “You won’t hear me complain about it, though.”

“Same, but my suspicion won’t be dismissed that easily. I can usually tell when I’m being distracted from something.” I took a few bites of the waffle, stifling a moan at how damn good it actually was.

Kayla shrugged as she shoved more waffle into her mouth. “So be distracted. From what I understand, you could use it.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as I finished chewing. “And what is it exactly that you understand?”

“I know what Regina did,” she answered. “Matt sent her away for it with a few bodyguards. I guess she chose Vegas.”

“Did you also hear that she married Darren’s youngest brother yesterday?”

Kayla dropped her fork and nearly choked on her last bite, coughing heavily before she turned to me, her eyebrows practically touching her hairline.

“Are you serious!” she practically shrieked. When I nodded, sipping on my coffee, she released a heavy breath as her shoulders slumped slightly. “So that’s what he was so pissed off about.”

“Darren looked like he was going to kill Dominic for a minute.”

“Probably would have been a mercy compared to what he’s in for.”

“He did it to get back at Darren for when I beat the shit out of him last month.”

Kayla snorted before she took a sip of her orange juice. “She’s not worth it.”

“Well, I guess he’s just going to have to continue to learn the hard way.”

And the hard way was often an excellent opportunity for drama, disaster, and total destruction. I might just be able to spin that opportunity in my favor.

“So aside from your near drug overdose, how was the rest of the honeymoon?” Kayla asked.

“The beginning was pretty great actually,” I said as I poured myself a cup of coffee. “We toured the Mediterranean on Darren’s yacht and visited Spain, France, and Italy. To my surprise, he was actually a very agreeable tourist.”

“Damn, that’s quite a honeymoon. How many feet was the yacht?”

“I don’t know, like a couple of hundred feet or something?”

Kayla’s eyes lit up. “Damn, bitch, that’s not a yacht, that’s a super yacht!”

I raised a brow at her. “You into yachts or something?”

She shrugged. “My uncle has a one-twenty-footer on the East Coast. Not to mention it’s almost impossible to grow up in Michigan without being on a boat. I had plans to get my own when I could afford it.”

I knew what she meant. I’d grown up around Lake St. Clair before moving to Royal Oak as an adult. Boating was life, but I still preferred jet skis any day. There was so much more freedom involved.

“Can you drive one?” I asked.

“Of course, I can,” she replied almost appearing offended.

“Good to know.”

“Anything else happen? You were gone for a long time.”

I contemplated if I should tell her about Rome. The auction, the aftereffects, the shootout the next morning. She’d lose her mind. But I would hate being outside the loop too.

When I was done explaining everything that had happened, she nearly choked on her coffee. Once she could finally breathe and wasn’t coughing everywhere, she turned to address me, her eyes bloodshot as she gave me a blank stare.

“That’s a lot to lay out all at once, Jaden,” she said.

I shrugged. “You asked.”

“Jesus. You killed that many people?”

“They tried to shoot my dog. And then they tried to take me as well.”

Kayla regarded me closely, her eyes scrutinizing me up and down like she was trying to figure something out.

“Yet you seem cool as a cucumber about it.”

I dismissed that immediately. “It’s not like I have much of a choice, dude.”

She actually glared at me. “So you’re just some badass little assassin with no conscience now or what?”

I narrowed my eyes at her, not exactly liking what she was implying. It wasn’t like I enjoyed killing people. That was Darren’s avenue. But in his world, it was kill or be killed. And I intended to survive them just like I would survive him.

“I do what I have to,” I answered.

She huffed a giant breath before her shoulders caved in a little. I could see the turmoil over her face as her eyes glazed with concern. “I just don’t want to see you turn into him. That’s all,” she whispered.

I understood her concern. I would be afraid for me too if I knew the things I was being exposed to. And while I was becoming increasingly desensitized to the blood and violence I was surrounded with, it had yet to truly hinder my conscience.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” I offered sincerely.

“Well, good morning, ladies,” Carla interrupted us from behind. She stood in the doorway in a knee-length red skirt and a leopard print blouse. The black stilettos she was wearing added four extra inches to her already tall frame.

“Morning,” I replied, giving her small nod.

“Well, it’s a bright and sunny day out there, so eat up and get ready to go. We’ve got lots to do today.”

“What’s on the agenda?” I asked as I pushed my empty plate away.

Carla turned to me with an odd smile. “Literally anything you would like to do. We’re in Vegas. The sky’s the limit.”

*I almost laughed. What a bunch of bullshit.*

“Kayla, have you ever been to Vegas?” I asked.

“Once,” she answered. “When I was seventeen.”

“Anything you want to do now that you couldn’t do then?”

She scoffed. “Not much you can do when you aren’t twenty-one. I don’t have that problem anymore. But do you know what does sound really nice? A spa day.”

Carla gasped. “Now that’s a fantastic idea,” she said almost a little too excitedly.

I almost rolled my eyes.

“Okay, I’ll agree to a spa day *if* we can walk the Strip afterward. I want to actually *see* Vegas, not just get pampered in Vegas.”

“Sounds perfect,” Kayla said.

“Excellent. Let me get us scheduled, and then we’ll head out,” Carla said as she pulled her phone out of her skirt pocket and left the room.

Kayla and I stood from our chairs just as Camaro trotted in to finally greet me.

“Hey, pretty girl!” Kayla shrieked as she bent down to pet her, Camaro finally accepting her as a friend and not a threat.

I used that opportunity to corner Clive and Owen in the living room. They were still sitting on the couch, looking far more comfortable than I’d ever seen them before as they sipped on their coffee and continued to watch the news.

“Will I be seeing him tonight?” I asked.

“In the evening,” Clive answered, tipping his head toward the TV.

Glancing at the screen, the news station was covering a story about a local gang that had been slaughtered overnight. Ten people had been butchered to pieces, their bodies scattered all over the floor of their clubhouse accompanied by several bullet casings, some belonging to shotguns and others belonging to pistols. A destroyed baseball bat was found lodged in the skull of one man, a fireman’s ax sticking out of the chest of another, two had been set on fire, and another had been completely decapitated. The rest just seemed to be slashed apart by what had to be a machete of some kind.

“Jesus,” I said under my breath. “Anyone I might know?” I asked aloud. The scene had Darren’s name all fucking over it.

“Maybe,” Owen answered, a dark look in his eyes.

I decided it wasn’t worth toying on. I just hoped that Darren had calmed down since then. I didn’t feel like dealing with his murderous rage right now. Suddenly, that spa appointment sounded really fucking good, so when Carla came back in to announce our appointment was in fifteen minutes, I’d never been happier to finally be distracted.

The five of us and Camaro all piled into the elevator to the first floor where the spa was located. For the next two hours, I received the pampering of my life. A one-hour full-body massage by a woman with the strongest hands I’d ever known. She’d turned my muscles into butter by the time she

was done, and I'd never felt more relaxed in my entire life. It was so good I almost considered begging Darren for a full-time massage therapist at his estate. Almost.

The next hour was spent on my hair and nails. I knew it was going to be hot outside, so I asked for a nicely done ponytail, the long, bouncy curls now dangling between my shoulder blades while my basic French tip nails and toes shined in the light of Vegas. Even Camaro was treated to some love with a pretty paws package that gave her the grooming of her life. I'd never seen her coat so shiny before. Kayla and Carla enjoyed the same treatment as me while Clive and Owen sat bored out of their minds in the lobby. Poor guys.

It was almost lunchtime when we were finally finished, and I was beyond eager to explore the fuck out of Vegas. Unwilling to dawdle any longer, I put on my aviators, sprayed on some quick sunscreen they had given me at the spa, and practically shoved everyone out the damn door so we could finally see something besides ourselves in damn mirrors. And I was not disappointed.

The streets were amazing. Even with how fucking hot it was outside, I couldn't stop taking every single thing in. Between all the amazing hotels, casinos, fountains, the street performers, the restaurants and shops, I was lost in a sea of sparkling imagery that transcended all expectations.

I was shocked I was still capable of walking without running into someone with how many people were on the streets. Even Camaro seemed to be having trouble sticking to my side. Clive and Owen were the ones making me nervous, though; their eyes in a constant state of surveillance as they maneuvered through the crowd. After touring Europe for so long, I'd sort of gotten used to being with people, but that didn't mean my guard was any lower than that of my bodyguards.

"You know, Jaden, just because I lived here doesn't mean I spent this much time walking here," Carla complained a few steps behind me.

"You used to live in Vegas?" I asked.

She huffed a little as she forced herself to keep up. "Yes, before I moved to San Diego."

"So you've lived here your whole life?"

"Should we stop and get you a new pair of shoes before you end up with blisters?" Owen interrupted, his tone slightly irritated. "Heels are not the best shoes to be walking in around here."

*Actually, that wasn't a bad idea.*

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, waving us off.

"You look like you're in pain," Kayla added.

"I'm fine, really," Carla continued.

I was glad I decided to wear my Vans with this army green romper I chose while Carla looked absolutely miserable as she tried to keep up with my pace in those stupid heels. We'd only been walking maybe another thirty minutes when I noticed she was lagging behind considerably. We had to wait for her to catch up twice. My patience had come to an end when I stopped in front of a shoe store and held the door for everyone.

"You want shoes?" Kayla asked.

"Not for me," I replied, nodding to Carla.

Carla didn't even complain, she just trudged her ass through and bought the first pair of walking shoes she could find. I also picked myself up a black baseball cap to protect my face from any further sun exposure and wore it with my ponytail tucked through the back closure. I could probably use a second dose of sunscreen while I was at it.

We then walked for maybe another thirty minutes before I decided to have us stop for lunch when I saw a patio of tables sticking out onto the Strip calling my name. A round of waters was desperately needed and appreciated when I gulped mine down in just a few seconds, the coolness of the water doing wonders for my scorched throat. I was grateful that our waitress also brought a giant bowl of water and a snack for Camaro.

We ordered lunch, a cold salad being the only thing I was interested in eating given the heat of the day. It was so dry in Vegas my eyes actually hurt.

"So, Carla, what did you do before this?" I asked, sticking my usual shovel into the pile of dirt sitting in front of me.

"I used to work here, actually. In Vegas," she answered as she sipped on her water.

"Doing what?"

She was hesitant before she answered, as if she were unsure if she should answer. "I managed one of your husband's brothels."

I stiffened in my seat, my face turning to complete stone as I stared at her from behind my dark aviators. If I had a gun on me, I think I would have shot her in the face.

“So, you were, what, a madam or something?” Kayla asked, a fresh grimace on her face.

“Sort of.”

“And so, this new position, is it an upgrade for you or something?” I continued.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it an upgrade. Just a change in services. Instead of managing their needs, I now manage yours.”

Clive shot me a look from the table next to us, the annoyed look in his eyes warning me to put away my shovel.

“I see. And what motivated the change?”

I could see Carla visibly gulp as she tried to stall by taking another sip of water.

“Mr. Davis needed an assistant for you. He thought I was the best candidate for the position. And I’m not one to argue that,” she countered.

“He thought a *madam* was the best candidate for the job?” The disgust in my voice was very clear.

“Is everyone finished?” Clive interrupted as he stood, a fresh warning glare on his face as he waited for me to take the hint.

I glared back but dropped the subject, standing from my chair and heading back onto the Strip. I couldn’t decide if it was worth fighting with Darren over later on. He would do just about anything he could to rub my nose in the shit I wanted nothing to do with. And I doubted it would be slowing down anytime soon.

We spent the next hour window shopping, but I wasn’t interested in buying anything else. I didn’t want to carry anything; I just wanted to see shit. I wanted something other than walls and windows to surround me. I wanted to be out in the world, to be seen and heard. And after getting a giant spoonful of it from my honeymoon, I never wanted to let it go. So I would overindulge whenever I could.

As we continued our walk, a massive crowd from the crosswalk practically bulldozed their way through us, separating some of us as we maneuvered through them to cross the street. And that was the exact moment a black van casually pulled up right in front of me.

I didn’t even get a chance to react because everything happened within the span of mere seconds. The door opened just as the van stopped, two men quickly jumping out to grab my arms and throw me into the van with such force I nearly lost my breath. I could hear my name being screamed by



someone scrambled with more panicked voices in the air as people rushed away for their own safety.

Kicking my legs as hard I could, I made a connection only once as I attempted to throw my weight around and land punches, but the second my back hit the floor of the van, the door was already closed and a large hand was pinning my chest down while a needle was shoved into my arm.

The drug took effect almost as instantly as my panic did, dizziness overwhelming my senses before I could even get a good look at my attackers, my limbs becoming too heavy to move. I remembered thinking only one thing before my world went completely black.

*Well fuck me.*

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Waking up was always the worst part. The fear of where you were, who you were with, and what they planned to do to you was churning away like a concrete mixer in my gut. With my mouth mimicking the Sahara Desert and my head channeling a rave party, I grunted from the grogginess I was trying to fight off. I needed to regain focus and figure out what the fuck had happened. But the dark sense of déjà vu threatened to take over as it quickly iced up my spine as I recalled the last time I woke up after being tossed in the back of a van.

I was thankful for a few notable differences, though, one being that I still had my clothes and shoes on, minus my hat. I could feel myself strapped to a wooden chair, my wrists bound by zip ties to the arms and a dark hood over my head. My body didn't feel very sore anywhere else, so it was likely I hadn't been assaulted or violated ... yet.

Silently pushing my feet into the ground, I felt concrete under me, which meant I was likely either in a basement, a warehouse, or a garage. The damp musk of mold in the cool air clued me into the probability of a basement, which meant getting out would be that much harder. *Fuck.*

But as I sat there, feeling every single thing my body could touch, it was very evident the collar around my neck had not yet been removed, which meant my kidnappers were either incredibly stupid or there was something else at play here.

Deciding to end the mystery, I made my awareness known and moved, encouraging the attention of maybe four or five people who were inside the room with me, the shuffling of their shoes alerting me as they closed in.

It was about to be go-time.

I coughed to clear my throat. “Are we going to keep playing games, or are you gonna take this goddamn thing off?” I said, my voice muffled from the stupid hood. God, my throat felt like shit.

The hood was then yanked from my head, and as soon as my eyes adjusted to the light, my stomach immediately soured as I came face to face with a severely pissed off looking Darren towering over me. Clive, Owen, and Scott stood off to the side keeping their distance.

“Fuck,” was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

*I’d been set up.*

The only response I got in return was a slap right across my face, the sting smarting instantly as it spread through my cheek.

I supposed I sort of deserved that. My colossal fuckup of getting kidnapped was not overlooked just because it was by Darren’s men. That was the whole point. It was a test, and I had failed it in about ten seconds.

While I was relieved to find I was not in the clutches of some lunatic enemy of Darren’s, the relief was short lived and completely dissatisfactory now that I had to deal with the consequences of proving to him that I was not as much of a hell raiser as I thought I was.

*Dammit.*

That cold stern look never leaving his face, Darren stepped closer to me, his arms folded across his chest, so much fury coming off him I could practically feel it against my skin. He was such a tall, imposing man, the sheer muscular size of him compared to myself enough for my stomach to clench with fear. I knew all too well the dangerous amount of strength that massive body harbored and how effortless it was for him to hurt me. It made being in this particular position so much worse than I wanted to remember, my vulnerability creating so much tension in my body I felt stiffer than a corpse.

I could recall far too many people being in this exact position before him, shivering with fear as they waited for the decimation of his judgment. I remembered being so thankful that it wasn’t me in that chair while I watched him do horrific things to people, and now, here I was. Again. And the fact that not twenty-four hours ago, he had brutally annihilated an entire gang overnight, my stomach shrank with anxiety.

I wanted to maintain my bravado like it was my last lifeline, but the longer those menacing eyes held mine, my pulse couldn’t help but quicken as my bravery began to slip through my white-knuckled fingers.

“Do you have any idea how incredibly disappointed I am?” he said, his tone low, even, and absolutely terrifying.

If my mouth was dry before, it instantly turned to powder before I found the courage to answer him.

“How many stab wounds do you have?” I countered, trying to remain somewhat confident.

“Excuse me?”

I tried again. “How many stab wounds do you have?” I repeated. He had enough battle scars on his body for an entire army.

It only took him a second to catch where I was going. “I have enough,” he answered darkly.

I nodded. “And I’m sure you’ve learned from all of them, so ... consider this my first stab wound.”

The best I could do was try to rationalize with him. Not every scenario was going to go perfectly, and he knew this. He’d experienced it himself more than anyone. Why wasn’t I subject to the same standard of failure?

His vicious gaze never left mine as he reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a butterfly knife, flicking his wrist to allow the blade to slice through the air. *Ah, fuck.*

“Your *first* stab wound, huh? So you anticipate more?” he replied as he played with the blade, the metal twirling through his fingers and making me incredibly nervous. And then he gripped the handle and made his way toward me.

I instantly cringed in panic. “Goddammit, Darren, it was just a metaphor!” I nearly shrieked as he raised his arm. I watched behind half closed eyes as his arm struck down and stabbed the wood of the chair right between my spread thighs, the knife sticking straight up like some dark menacing joke meant to taunt me.

Darren then leaned over me, giving off that deadly predator vibe as he cornered his obvious prey, readying for the kill and making my heart stop in my chest. It was way too much work to rein in my panic and regulate my lack of breathing.

His hands landed on my forearms that were still zip tied to the arms of the chair, squeezing too tightly for comfort as his dark gaze met mine, icy chills racing up my spine while heat began to liquify in my panties.

“You’re not ready,” he suddenly declared.

The breath I had just been holding escaped in a puff of shock.

He might as well have just slapped me again.

“Excuse me?” I howled. “What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?”

He stood, and suddenly, his demeanor was all business as he straightened his dark suit jacket.

“Those men you fought in Rome were amateurs. My men are professionals, and you didn’t stand a fucking chance against *two of them*,” he growled, gesturing to me with a wave of his hand. “If this is the result of all your training, then it isn’t enough. I won’t risk someone getting their hands on you, especially so they can get to me.”

For some reason, I was still having a difficult time taking in a breath. The harsh finality of his words prodded at the crushing weight of disappointment that clutched my chest, the tightness increasing until I thought I might actually cry. Whatever self-esteem or self-worth I thought I’d had ten seconds before was instantly pulverized into dust at the thought of not being good enough to him, of being that kind of a liability, of still being considered weak. It was an odd sense of rejection I was not prepared for.

*I was still weak to him. Incapable. Helpless. Worthless.*

My eyes fell to the floor as all my confidence spilled out of me in waves of guilt and self-doubt, washing down the rusty drain that sat between my feet in the floor. The way I handled Rome hadn’t been enough even though I’d saved his ass in the end. What more could I do then? What would be enough? And what the actual fuck was the alternative? I worked way too damn hard to be told I wasn’t good enough. Training was all I did, all I strived for, to be just as lethal as him, no matter how impossible that seemed. I couldn’t give up here. I had to change his mind somehow. I had to prove him wrong.

“What brought this on?” I asked, my voice dry with tension.

Darren folded his massive arms again against his wide chest as he stared down at me as though I was some errant child. “I had some time to think last night.”

“Before or after you took out that gang?” I interrupted. My curiosity always got the better of me.

“After,” he clarified, that evil glint in his eye shining for recognition. “I came to the realization of how much it pains me that I can’t even trust my own family with you. And if I can’t trust my own family, then your vulnerability is worse than I thought.”

If I wasn't so pissed about the situation, I would have smiled internally. The family foundation was already beginning to crack. That domino was so ready to fall.

"Italy was cause for concern," Darren continued. "I was pleased you handled yourself well, but it wasn't enough for me. I needed to know if you could take on the pros just as well as the amateurs. And now I have my answer."

I gritted my teeth at the unfairness of his logic. "I'd like to remind you that you were almost killed by those same *amateurs*, in case you forgot."

Darren shook his head. "You weren't the only one with access to a grenade then, Jaden. The result would have been the same. You just beat us to the punch."

Unfuckingbelievable.

"And what about Carter? Was he an amateur too?"

"Carter was luck. If your bodyguards were where they were supposed to be, Carter never would have had the chance."

I fucking exploded. "LUCK! You call my reflexes, agility, and accuracy luck! Go fuck yourself! I can't believe you're trying to discredit me like this!"

"Watch your fucking attitude," he warned with a snarl. "I gave you an opportunity to prove me wrong today and you failed. There is nothing to discredit when the results are obvious."

I scoffed and shook my head at the fact that he was now dismissing me and my efforts. Why was I even surprised? But it wasn't even a fair game. It wasn't like I had the same opportunities or tools to defend myself like everyone else did.

I lifted my head to meet Darren's gaze head on. "Maybe you should give me a fucking gun then," I nearly spat. If I'd been armed, I would have had the chance to at least shoot my attackers first before they'd gotten to me. Not to mention it had been a controlled environment! He set me up to fail! It was such bullshit!

Darren snorted before he replied. "I wish I could. But I can't fucking trust you with one!" he retorted angrily.

"There's a shock collar around my neck that tracks my every move, and you know where all of my family members are! I am not that fucking stupid!"

“It’s not enough!” he shouted at me, the spike in his voice causing me to jolt. “I could send you out with an entire fucking army, and it wouldn’t be enough.”

“Jesus Christ, enough for what?!” I cried. “What’s it gonna take?! What more can I sacrifice for you, huh? What more can I do? You want my heart? Is that it? I guarantee you it still won’t be enough to secure my loyalty. My potential for betrayal will always be in the back of your mind because that’s just who you are. Your paranoia with trust is what makes you a survivalist; it’s why you’re on top. I don’t see you being willing to sacrifice that level of security just for me.”

The glare I received then was just enough to almost make me back down as I nearly cringed away. “I don’t have time for your fucking mental games anymore, Jaden. This is between life or death now, not love or hate. With Regina and Dominic’s obvious distaste for you and a new adversary I have yet to discover, I can’t afford the risk. Not until I’m confident in your ability to handle yourself.”

I scoffed at his obvious deflection. “So what the hell does that mean then? What, you’re gonna *bench* me or something? The ‘queen’ is demoted back to being a ‘princess’ again?”

“When we eventually return home, you won’t be leaving the estate again for a while. No more public outings unless necessary. And you don’t leave my fucking sight.”

*Back to being a bird in a cage. Great.*

“Great, ya know what? Fuck it. You might as well just put me back in that fucking cage, and I’ll go back to sucking your dick whenever you want.”

He had his hand painfully clutching my entire jaw before I could even blink, that subtle reminder of just how strong that hand was keeping me stiff in my seat. “Keep talking like that, and I just might. It’s not half a bad idea really.”

I felt my gut shrivel a little at the idea that he might actually follow through with it. He wouldn’t, though. We were past that. Weren’t we?

Emotion was boiling up inside me as those eyes bore down into me. Rage, envy, disappointment, doubt, and hatred were all thundering away inside me, creating one giant storm of fear. What was I going to do now?

As if on cue, that one single angry tear I was fighting to contain slipped out, catching Darren’s attention as he watched it slide all the way down my

cheek before he ultimately swiped it away with his thumb.

“This is fucking insulting,” I groaned through his unrelenting grip.

He actually found the nerve to smirk at me. “Hate me all you want but at least you’ll be alive to do so.”

He then released my face to grip the knife still sticking out of the chair and quickly sliced through the zip ties at my wrists. I just scoffed at him again, wishing I could roll my eyes. This was complete bullshit.

Pocketing the knife, he took my hand in his, swiftly pulling me from the chair into his body, the warm expanse of his chest somehow bringing me comfort when all I could feel was seething fury and suffocating anxiety. Just being this close to him made me feel so small, so fucking helpless, my inferior physicality only further validating his reasoning. He was a giant among men and a titan among me. No one made me feel more vulnerable, and I hated him for it.

Drawing his knuckles gently along my jaw, he lifted my chin to bring my eyes to his. Darren stared down at me for a long time then, those dark menacing blues making me squirm under his intense scrutiny until I thought I might disappear.

“You have no idea how precious you are,” he nearly whispered, the depth of his voice bringing tremors to my skin. “You’re so small, so fucking fragile that it actually terrifies me. That’s why I push you harder than anyone. Because my greatest fear is not my vulnerability, Jaden, it’s yours.”

I didn’t want to give into this. I didn’t want to sympathize with his reasoning. I knew his world was dangerous because he’d shown me over and over again. But what he failed to understand was that his world was dangerous because he was in it. Danger invited competition.

“Perhaps you should trade me in for a taller model then. I’m sure you still have the receipt somewhere.”

That earned me a smirk and a slight shake of his head as he pressed his lips to my temple.

“Not a chance, small fry. No one fits around my cock the way you do.”

My response was a no-nonsense glare, showing that I was not impressed by that answer, but it only made him clutch me tighter.

“You remember your original objective of keeping me happy?” he continued. “Then go back to the shadows, my little queen. It’s where I know you’re safe.”



I shook my head at him, unwilling to fall victim to his manipulations. “Safe from who?” I replied darkly. “Even if I’m *safely* tucked away in those shadows, there’s still one villain left lurking there – you.”

An evil grin appeared on Darren’s face before he dipped down to claim my mouth with his, his passion for me so evident with the depth of his kiss that it made my stomach flutter. “I’ll always be your villain, Jaden,” he nearly whispered as he grazed his lips over mine. “Even when I’m not.”

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A cough from behind us alerted me that there were still other people in the room. Clive, Owen, and Scott stood awkwardly to the side. A second later, loud music began playing above us, the floors rattling from the heavy bass as voices and footsteps mingled with it.

“Where are we?” I asked, turning my attention back to Darren.

Instead of answering, he took my hand and led me toward the stairs. “Come on, we have a party to attend. And you need to change.”

*Red flags. Red flags everywhere.*

“If it’s another auction ...” I warned as I followed him up the stairs. I didn’t care what the consequences would be. I would murder every purchaser in that room.

As we exited the basement with Clive, Owen, and Scott in tow, we entered a hallway that was completely consumed with red lighting, the source of the music getting louder and louder as we approached.

Darren stopped short at a door to our right, opening it to pull me in behind him, leaving the rest of our entourage to remain in the hallway. Inside was some kind of large office with a huge one-way mirror that showed the other side of a bar.

Darren released my hand to rummage through a nearby closet, his demeanor suddenly that of a man on a mission. Relief was apparent when he eventually handed me a hanger with a little black dress draped over it.

“Put that on,” he ordered as he headed back into the closet.

Trying not to roll my eyes, I changed into the black garment, discovering it was a slim-fitting dress that reached just above my knees with cutouts in the front so you could clearly see my four-pack. The thin shoulder straps kept my muscular shoulders and arms revealed while the cut

showed just a little bit of cleavage. I tried to decide if it was something I could fight in, catching the stretch of the fabric and the forgiveness in the waistline. I could probably make something happen in it.

When Darren came back with a pair of shoes, the six-inch pumps making me cringe, he stopped when he took notice of my appearance.

“On second thought,” he said, carelessly tossing the shoes over his shoulder as he looked me up and down. “I kind of like this look on you. It’s fitting actually.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said. “Those shoes you had looked like a damn death trap.”

He smirked. “I thought you might want a few extra inches tonight.”

I shook my head. “I don’t need them. You’re just putting me at a disadvantage anyway.”

Darren stepped toward me, his hands raising to draw my ponytail from my back to fall down my chest, his fingers twirling through the curls that had managed to remain intact after the placement of that god-awful hood. Irritation boiled in my blood as I still found myself seeking the approval in his eyes, and when I found it, I wanted to slaughter the butterflies that took flight in my stomach.

“I need you to do something for me tonight, my little queen,” he said.

I lifted a brow. “Queen? Didn’t you just tell me to sit down?”

“That’s for when we go home,” he answered. “Until then, especially while we’re here in Vegas, you need to maintain a certain demeanor. This is the underground, and I need you to walk in there like you own the damn place and everybody in it. There are some people in there who *may* try to test you. Set them straight if they do.”

I tilted my head at him. “Where the hell are we?”

That evil glint in his eye returned just to taunt me. “I told you, The Underground.”

Darren then took my hand and led us back out into the hallway where Scott, Clive, and Owen were still waiting. We continued down the hallway until we came to a set of black double doors, the source of the bass coming from beyond them.

“Remember what I said,” Darren warned. When I nodded, he opened the doors to reveal the source of the seismic booms coming from the other side, and I found myself lost in a sea of darkness, bodies, and strobe lights. The space could only be described as some sort of gothic looking ballroom,

the red lighting now mixed with strobe lighting to shadow what was clearly going on.

Stripper poles were everywhere; some were alone on giant block-like stages while some stuck out of the table booths. Women in the most barely-there lingerie I'd ever seen walked the scene, some dancing on the poles as Rob Zombie's "Dragula" boomed throughout the massive room, their clothing quickly falling to the floor as men and women stood around them to throw cash at their chunky high-heeled feet.

As my eyes scanned the room, my disgust only seemed to grow. Several little orgies were in play in different corners of the room, numerous men getting blowjobs in the booths while enjoying the show of women kissing and fondling each other in nearly every direction I looked. And all of the women were so fucking young, it made me want to wring Darren's fucking neck.

I instantly wondered how many of these women were actually here of their own free will. And I had a damn good guess.

Ignoring my obvious distaste, Darren pulled me along through the room, his arm around my stiff frame and keeping me very tightly close to his body as he maneuvered us through the crowd. Remembering Darren's request in demeanor, it was easy to maintain the absolute bitch face I had going on right now. I might not have actually owned anything in that room, but I sure as fuck hated everything I saw.

As we passed many of the strippers, almost none of them even looked our way. They all either turned away or flat-out fled the area to gain someone else's attention. Any gazes I did happen to catch were filled with either curiosity, fear, or pity – all feelings that were mutual.

We passed a huge bar with several topless bartenders serving drinks, continuing beyond the DJ that was playing in the corner until we came to a set of stairs guarded by two men that led up to a VIP section. Passing another two guards who nodded at us, we came to a loft-style space with a balcony that had a view out over the scene. A private bar with a single bartender was set up at the far end with several sofas and chairs arranged in the middle.

Apparently, we were, in fact, late for a party since several people I didn't recognize were already socializing. Two guards stood near the bar, and four were surrounding the seating area. They didn't appear too tense for the atmosphere. Among them were probably ten or fifteen different men in

suits sitting or standing around with drinks in one hand and a woman in the other. These women seemed to be different than the ones on the first floor. They were dressed a little classier, their attitudes exuding confidence and sex appeal as they practically wrapped themselves around the men.

*The professionals.*

My stomach soured at the thought.

Taking in the rest of the crowd, I felt some relief ease the tension in my muscles when I came across some familiar faces. Matt was lounging in a chair with Kayla in his lap, his face warped with disgust as he watched Dominic and Regina make out on the couch next to him. While none of that was surprising, I was surprised to see Dan and Katherine here. They made rare appearances for a reason, and they certainly didn't look pleased. I wondered if they were just as happy for the newlyweds as everyone else was.

I noticed Kayla lean in to say something to Matt. When he nodded, she nearly bolted off his lap toward me, slowing her approach before Darren might swat her away. Thankfully, he just released my shoulders with a final squeeze before pressing a quick kiss to my temple. "Get a drink and relax," he said before walking ahead, giving Kayla the clearance to embrace me in a massive hug.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed. "I thought you were dead and I would never see you again!"

*A fair assumption but damn if it wasn't salt in the wound.*

"I'm fine," I replied, bringing my arms up to comfort her. "No need to worry."

"I mean, Jesus, it was like two seconds, and you were gone!"

"Yeah, I remember." Could we stop remembering now?

"Clive and Owen said it was just a training exercise, and that you would be fine, but damn, I didn't know that! What if they were traitors and had lied about it! I would have never known!"

I narrowed my brows at her, not liking that idea one bit. Because she made a good point.

"Well, let's be glad that wasn't the case," I said, shooting Clive and Owen a dirty look as they stood beside us.

"Glad to know it wouldn't be much of a challenge then," Owen said with a laugh.

I turned to him with a glare. "Tell that to the last group of men who tried. I don't think they were laughing in the end."

Owen's face went serious. "Mario Ricci hired idiot criminals off the streets and put guns in their hands. We actually train our men. Now you know the difference."

I smirked. "Clive, how are your ribs feeling?" I asked, reminding both of them that they weren't invincible to amateurs either.

"They're just fine," he replied, his voice deep with a little menace in it.

"Oh, I'm sure they are," I said with a smile before turning back to Kayla. "Come on, let's get a drink."

With a Jack and Coke in hand, Kayla and I left the bar and headed over to the balcony so I could observe from a far. Darren seemed relaxed in the conversation he was currently having with three other men, the women around them appearing completely unaffected by his presence. I memorized the faces of everyone in that room, taking mental notes of who Darren seemed to favor and who he didn't based on his body language. He looked comfortable with just about everyone there.

Regina, on the other hand, appeared even more than comfortable. She laughed alongside Dominic, clutching his arm so she could rub her obnoxious cleavage all over it. The heated expression on Matt's face as he watched them was almost comical. Katherine looked uncomfortable as she stood next to Daniel while he spoke with the same group of men as Darren. I waved at her, wondering if maybe she could come join us, but all she did was smile in return.

Kayla seemed a little tense as she kept her focus on Matt as he chatted with other men as well, his eyes frequenting the chests of the other women around him. He didn't appear too shy about it either.

Eventually the crowd shifted and Matt, Dominic, Daniel, Darren, Scott, and three other men were involved in conversations, which was when Darren finally called me over to join them. Kayla was right behind me since Matt had then signaled her to approach as well.

Standing next to Darren, he pulled me into his side, his arm wrapped tightly around my shoulders as he smiled down at me for quick second before introducing me to his guests.

"Jaden, this is Anderson, Terrance, and Victor. They run several enterprises in Detroit."

*"Enterprises." That was cute.*

Each of them replied with the general pleasantries. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Davis.” *Barf.*

This time, I didn’t feel like playing the nice little wife.

“Detroit, huh? How long have you all been there?” I asked, eyeing each of them.

“All my life,” Terrance answered. “These two only wish they were that lucky.”

There was some banter and laughter between them, but I didn’t share in it. I could feel Darren stiffening beside me, and I enjoyed the fact that I was making him nervous.

“Well, there’s really only one way to tell if you’re a true Michigander,” I challenged.

Terrance caught my eye, the smirk on his face clear in his willingness to prove himself.

“Do you know how to play Euchre?”

A big belly laugh burst from his mouth as he threw his head back, his shoulders shaking as the chuckle rolled through him.

“Of course, I do!” he said through his laughter. “Shit, I haven’t played that in years. We should set up a tournament sometime if we can even find enough players who know how to play.”

“If they know how to play Spades, they should be able to pick it up quick enough,” I answered.

“Oh, shit, speaking of Spade,” Matt interrupted. “Before I forget again, he wants to renegotiate your contract since those three years are almost up.”

Darren didn’t look too pleased at Matt after that little addition.

“I’ll call him,” Darren said, his tone finite, clearly unwilling to discuss it any further in front of everyone.

But Dominic didn’t look uninterested. “Wait, *Javier* Spade?” he asked, his intrigue alarmingly obvious.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Daniel warned as he glared at Dominic.

“What!” Dominic said, brushing off the concern like it was some kind of joke. “The fucker only still owes me his Pagani after that poker game I won.”

“You mean the poker game you cheated in?” Darren added, completely unamused. “He knows you paid off that dealer. Let me handle it.”

“Why don’t you let me go down there, and I’ll square the whole thing up. Clear up the game and negotiate some better terms for us,” Dominic

continued, his tone full of challenge and humor that I didn't trust.

"Don't you have a honeymoon to plan?" Daniel chided, causing Matt to visibly grimace.

Dominic shrugged as he pulled Regina closer to his side with a wide smile across his face. "I doubt she'll mind. Besides, the rest of our lives can be one big honeymoon."

Regina smiled up at Dominic before she managed a quick sneer back at me.

The fuck was she playing at?

"No," Darren said, the finality of his tone dismissing Dominic's request. "I need you here, not in Honduras pissing off the very few allies we have left down there."

Dominic waved him off. "I can handle him just fucking fine. You have nothing to worry about," he replied, the venom in his voice suddenly very familiar. But Darren wasn't impressed.

"Oh, really? Because I just cleaned up the turf war you were about to have with the goddamn Chop Shop because you couldn't secure negotiations with Marcus like I told you to months ago. Instead, you pissed him off, and he went to the Italians to arrange a deal to take you out of Vegas so they could split our turf."

Dominic's face went from lighthearted and joking to fierce rage in a single second. "What the fuck are you talking about? I spoke with him two weeks ago. Everything was fine!"

"Your intuition is shit if you seriously thought everything was fine," Darren chastised. "You're not going to pull the same garbage with Spade if that's the kind of negotiating I have to rely on."

Dominic suddenly burst forward, shrugging Regina right out of his arms. "Man, why the fuck do we even use Spade anyway? He's just a fucking middleman."

"Dom, do you have to argue about everything?" Daniel chimed in, clearly annoyed.

"Seriously, I have a lot invested with this guy. Don't fuck with it, Dom," Matt warned.

Darren released me from his side and got right in Dominic's face. "He's a damn good middleman with the connections we need to ensure our shit moves from Columbia without issues. If you can't comprehend that, then there's clearly no reason for you to go down there so you can fuck it all up."



I don't need to go to war with him or his brother because he killed you for running your fucking mouth."

Now Dominic looked insulted as he took a step toward Darren nearly shoving Regina even farther away from him. "What the fuck—" was all that came out of Dominic's mouth before Darren took him by the shoulders and quickly moved him away from the group.

"Walk and we'll talk," Darren rumbled, Dominic stiffening as he went with him into another room that from a glimpse looked like an office before they slammed the door behind them.

Awkward silence resumed.

"You just had to bring that up now?" Daniel said, turning to Matt.

Matt shrugged. "I'd forgotten three times already. And he mentioned it like three weeks ago."

"He's a fucking hothead, Matt. You should know this," Scott said before he parted from the group for the bar.

I glanced at Katherine who managed to maintain a blank face as she held Daniel's arm. She didn't seem surprised at all. Regina looked a little confused as her brows knitted together, her lips forming a tight line while she fiddled with the rock on her finger. She caught my raised brow at her expression and quickly returned a glare.

I suddenly got a whiff of opportunity.

"Well, I think this calls for a run to the ladies' room," I said aloud and excused myself from the group that was beginning to chuckle at the display of sibling rivalry.

Marching past the guards, I made my way into the restroom that resembled a damn suite, walking through a lobby until I got to the back that held at least ten stalls. After relieving my bladder, I moved to wash my hands, managing to dry them before the door opened again. I tried not to smile as Regina stood in the way of the lobby.

"Hello, Jaden," she said, her voice far more confident than it should be.

"Regina," I said with a nod, a hint of warning in my voice.

She crossed her arms under her large fake chest, creating even more cleavage in her already low-cut gold beaded cocktail dress. "Did you have a nice honeymoon?" The sneer in her voice was unmistakable.

"It was an unforgettable experience. I almost didn't survive it," I said enthusiastically.

She stared at me for a beat before she answered. “Yes, I heard about the shootout in Rome. I’m so glad to see you weren’t hurt.”

“Yeah, it was pretty intense. But of course, it wasn’t the only attempt someone made against me,” I replied, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Oh? There was another?” she continued innocently.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, come on, Regina, it’s just us girls in here. You don’t have to lie to me.”

She pursed her lips, popping her hip out before she finally admitted it. “Did you at least enjoy the high?”

I chuckled at her. “It was very surreal, but not something I’ll be looking to partake again in the future. I like to keep a clear head, ya know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Sounds like you had a good time then.”

I nodded. “Sorry, you’ll have to do better next time if you really want to be rid of me.”

She scoffed. “Like I need to worry about you anymore. I already have what I want, and you haven’t even congratulated me on it.” She lifted her left hand to twirl her hair between her fingers, bringing my attention to the giant engagement ring flashing in the light. “We’re practically sisters now.”

I felt my stomach retch at the thought.

“Congratulate you on your success of manipulating your way into this fucked-up family? My condolences for your missing brain cells.”

She scoffed at me before she glared. “Dominic will make a fine husband. And I’ll be free of Matt and be the queen you only wish you were.”

*Oh, bitch, please just line the dominos up for me. This was going to be fucking easy.*

It was my turn to scoff. “And your strategy was to marry the one at the lowest end of the totem pole? Brilliant.” I even gave her a small clap of applause.

“Well, it’s not like I got the entire pick of the litter,” she snapped.

*Oh, was that shade for me?*

“But Dominic’s going to be at the top of the world before you know it,” she continued. “He’ll even surpass Darren one day. You’ll see. And then you’ll be sorry you ever doubted him. Or me.”

I bursted out laughing. “I’m sorry, were we not just privy to the same conversation? Darren can’t trust him with anything because he’s a class A fuckup with the history to prove it. You saw how quickly he shut him down

out there. He'll never be anything more than what Darren *allows* him to be. I wouldn't forget that if I were you."

Taking two angry steps toward me, her platform bright pink stilettos clacking against the tile floor, Regina pointed a very sharp and polished acrylic at me. "Listen here, you tiny little shit, I will stomp all over you if you push me too far. Don't make that mistake."

I smiled up at the pretty fake face of hers. "Careful, Regina," I said, taking a step toward her. "There's no one to protect you from your own stupidity in here. I kicked the shit out of Dominic in a matter of minutes. You sure you want to threaten me?"

She stared down at me with a hellfire I could feel all over my face. Good. I wanted to stir that fire until it was a fucking inferno.

"It doesn't matter," she finally murmured. "You're just another doubter standing in his way. He's gonna take the world by storm one day and do what Darren only wish he could."

Goddamn, she was so delusional it was embarrassing.

"Yeah? I'd love to see him try that in Honduras. Oh, that's right, he listens to Darren like he should. So I guess we'll just never know, will we?"

"We'll see about that, you little cunt," she spat before she turned around and stormed out of the bathroom.

I released a breath of deep satisfaction, certain the seeds I just planted in Regina's head would bring forth the fruit of destruction I was officially growing. One by one, at some point or another, they would all fall to the ground, and I would kick their moldy, worm-infested carcasses right out of my life.

Fixing my hair in the mirror, I turned back toward the door and left the bathroom to find Dominic and Regina walking down the stairs. Evidently, they were leaving the party. Darren made his way toward me, a concerned look on his face.

"What did you say to Regina?" he asked. So, she'd made her attitude known. Excellent.

I shrugged. "Told her that her shoes were ugly."

Darren snorted, obviously not finding that reaction to be far-fetched for her.

"Were you able to calm Dominic down?" I asked, keeping my tone incredibly genuine.

“For now,” he replied as he watched them make their way through the crowd and leave. But his eyes still held the concern he had every reason to feel. But penance wasn’t a road we were bound for. War was on its way.

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For the next two days, Kayla and I spent our time in the hotel since I was benched from public outings without Darren. We gave Camaro a bath and played with her in the suite before lunch, watched a few movies, worked out, played video games, and then I'd see Darren at the end of the day when I was already in bed.

On the second day, we decided to teach Clive and Owen how to play Euchre since all they'd been doing was watching the damn news. The only thing that was on was more bad news anyway, so I couldn't understand why they were suddenly so fixated.

They were at least able to pick up the rules pretty quickly since they were familiar with Spades, and pretty soon, we had a full-blown game going with Clive as my partner and Owen as Kayla's since it was only fair. It didn't take long for the shit talking to start either.

"What the hell are you doing? I threw the king; you're supposed to throw something shitty," Kayla chastised Owen as I took the trick I'd just won. "You could have won the next trick with that."

"That was the only card in suit I had!" he replied.

"You should have used it earlier then when I called hearts trump."

I chuckled as I shuffled the cards for the next hand. "It's okay, Kayla. That's why it's called Euchre. Now, cut the deck," I said as I handed her the cards.

After the deck was cut, I passed out the next hand, watching as Clive looked at his phone, texting something back before pocketing it and picking up his cards.

"You girls need to be ready to leave in an hour," he said as he moved his cards around in his hand.

“For?” I asked as I moved mine around, focused on getting them organized.

“Underground fight club.”

That had me paused for a moment as I brought my eyes up from my hand.

“Say what now?” Kayla asked, trepidation all over her face.

“Holden’s underground fight club?” I asked, remembering him mentioning something like that at our wedding.

Clive nodded. “I pass,” he said and turned to Kayla, who looked even more nervous with the lack of answered questions.

“Pass,” she said blankly.

Looking down at my hand, I didn’t smile as I realized I had both red jacks and a shit ton of high diamonds.

“Diamonds alone,” I declared confidently.

After winning every hand and finishing the game, I stood to leave and get ready. “Come on, Kayla, we got shit to do.”

Wiping the sour look off her face, she slid her chair back to follow Camaro and me out of the dining room so we could change. An hour later, my long hair was flat ironed into sleek and shiny perfection while Kayla’s baby blond hair was curled at the ends. She went for the light, natural makeup and pink gloss while I went with the dark smoky eye and nude lip.

Stunning in her white and silver sequined dress and silver pumps, she looked like the girl next door while I looked like the bad bitch across the street in my black leather mini dress and black heeled booties. We were going to an underground fight club. Darren would expect me to look a certain part, and I didn’t mind bringing back a little bit of the old me into the mix. I loved donning leather when I went out, a privilege I wasn’t afforded much anymore.

“They’re waiting for you in the lobby,” Owen said as he knocked on the bedroom door.

I patted Camaro on the head and told her to be a good girl as I stood and headed for the door, stopping short when I noticed Kayla hadn’t moved yet. She’d been quiet the entire time we got ready.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She released a deep breath and dropped her shoulders as she looked at me. “Just have a bad feeling is all.”

“Based on?”

She shook her head. “Just something Matt said to me earlier today before I was dropped off.”

I tried not to get angry, but the idea that Kayla would withhold something that was concerning to her was off-putting.

“Would you like to share?” I asked gently as I stepped closer to her.

“He just said I need to stick close to you. Don’t wander off. Stay alert. After I just watched you get fake kidnapped. It just brought back a lot of shitty memories, ya know?”

I nodded in understanding. I knew what she meant. She was probably just as fucked up in the head as I was.

“Hey,” I consoled, my tone encouraging as I rubbed my hands up and down her arms. “Then just stay close. Everything’s going to be fine. Okay?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay.”

After she gave me a small smile, we headed out of the room, but my mind was already going into defense mode. Someone had threatened Kayla, and Matt was hiding it from her. *Fucking fuck.*

—

The car pulled up in front of large warehouse in the middle of the fucking desert, the parking lot containing all kinds of construction machines and trucks, cars everywhere, men walking around in vests and hard hats, making it look like an ordinary work site.

Exiting the car, Darren pulled me to his side. Matt did the same with Kayla while Scott, Clive and Owen, followed behind. Two other guards, Jake and Allan, who each drove a separate vehicle, one ahead of us, and one behind us, joined the rest of our party and followed toward the building. Once we were allowed inside by the guard at the door, we were led through the warehouse and down a set of stairs until we came in front of two double metal doors.

As soon as we entered, we were consumed by a room of absolute chaos. Men of all demographics were waving fistfuls of cash at each other while screaming at the top of their lungs. There was so much noise from calling out bets, screaming in all directions, that it was difficult to focus on one thing.

Ahead in the distance was an octagonal cage on top of a concrete pillar with two shirtless men in shorts already fighting with the surrounding crowd vigorously involved. The cage only received a few moments of my

attention before I was already set on finding exit points or potential threats. Kayla's bad feeling was quickly becoming my own as the only exit I could see was the one we came from. I didn't like that, and judging by the dark look that was now clouding Darren's face, he didn't like it either.

"Ah! You finally made it!" a voice said from a walkway in front of us. The man I recognized from our wedding stepped out from the crowd and made his way toward us, sticking his hand out to Darren.

"Quite the fire hazard you have here," Darren said as he shook his hand.

"We have sprinklers!" he shouted over the crowd as he pointed at the ceiling. "Come on, I reserved a table for you at the front!"

Following his lead, we walked along the path laid out for us as we came to the cage and found a large table set up for the perfect view. I could actually smell the blood and sweat that covered the floor of the cage from where I stood.

"You're actually just in time. Our main attraction is up next!" Holden shouted with obvious excitement. Darren nodded at him before he walked off into the crowd.

Taking our seats, Darren pulled me onto his lap, caging my back against his chest while his arms wrapped around me. Matt did the same with Kayla. Everyone else stood around off to the side where they could watch the crowd behind us.

"I want you to stay very close to either me or your guards, do you understand? *Do not* wander off," Darren warned.

I nodded. This wasn't exactly the place I wanted to get lost in.

Turning our attention to the fight in front of us, I gave the scene my full scrutiny. Both men were sloppy, untrained, and exhausted. Their shirts were gone, and in their place was a sheet of blood, sweat, and grime. Fists flew in all directions, feet hitting nothing but air while the crowd around them egged them on for more carnage. And when there was none, a meat cleaver was tossed into the cage.

Both men, suddenly energized by the weapon, lunged for it, their filthy bodies slipping in the blood beneath them. Wrestling for their finality, they twisted and turned, more punches landing until one man finally got the upper hand and grabbed the cleaver, turning his entire body with a massive effort to slice at the man behind him.

The first swing was a miss, causing the crowd to gasp and scream with anticipation until the cleaver finally met its target as it plunged down into



the side of other man's neck, just above his shoulder. Blood spilled everywhere as the cleaver was ripped from his flesh only to meet the same spot over and over again until his head was barely connected to his body. And still the screams roared on.

Darren hadn't moved at all as he watched the display, his face remaining impassive while his eyes held all the scrutiny of a man unimpressed. Matt, of course, was laughing at the scene while Kayla looked white as a damn ghost.

A small group of men then entered the cage and handed the man who was still standing a giant wad of cash while two more grabbed the body of the other and carried him out of the cage. Three older women then quickly entered the cage with several buckets and began to clean up the mess of blood all over the floor.

While they were cleaning, Holden came back to our table.

"What did you think?" he asked, his smile a little too bright for someone who entertained in death.

"I can get blood and gore any day of the week," Darren replied. "So can most of these men. I'll need more than just unskilled fights to the death to be impressed."

Holden's face remained stiff for just a second before he smiled. "Then you're gonna love our main attraction. She's up next," he replied and then hurried away through the crowd.

"She?" I asked as I turned back to Darren.

"Apparently, you have some competition," he replied with a smirk.

I glowered at him. "I doubt that."

Once the floor of the cage was clean enough and dried, the women quickly scurried away to make room for a very large man walking up the steps. Sizing him up, he was probably six feet two and maybe two hundred pounds of mostly muscle. His bald head shined from the lights above as he circled the cage, waving his arms around and roaring to rile up the crowd. He wore only a pair of loose fitted black shorts, his bare feet already picking up whatever blood didn't get cleaned from the previous fight. But as he circled the cage, I couldn't help but notice a slight twitch in his right knee with every step he made.

My observations were cut short as the lights above us dimmed low and music came over the loudspeakers in the ceiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” came a voice that echoed throughout the hall. “Are you ready for the main event!?” The crowd cheered wildly. “Then make some noise for the ALEXACUTIONER!”

The crowd absolutely erupted as spotlights came over an entry point into the room, a small figure walking out into the crowd. When the figure finally came closer, I realized it was a young woman with two large men behind her. All around her, people screamed things like “Alexacutioner,” “Mighty Mouse,” and “Tiny Terror,” as she walked on with the meanest face she could muster. And the closer she got, the more I recognized the monikers. She was tiny, smaller than me but by maybe only an inch or two. Her frame was slight, but I could see the hard ridges of muscle her black sports bra didn’t hide in both her arms, shoulders, and torso. The tight black mini shorts she wore showed off her heavily muscled thighs and calves. My body was toned, but my muscles weren’t that big. I was willing to bet she was a gymnast or some kind of athlete in her former life. Her short black hair had been styled into French braided pigtails at the top of her head, giving off that mouse-like appearance. Her pretty face was thankfully clean with no makeup. I’d be pissed if I had to deal with something as mundane as mascara bleeding into my eyeballs if I had to fight like this.

As she walked by, she actually glanced my way, a spark of recognition hitting us both as she turned back to the cage and made her way up the stairs. Why did she suddenly seem familiar to me?

As I watched her enter the cage, my stomach twisted with anxiety for her. The fact that her opponent had a foot on her and probably eighty pounds had me hoping she knew what she was doing. I also hoped they wouldn’t match her against him unless she actually had a fair chance of winning.

As she stood at the edge of the cage, her gaze never left the man opposite her, a level of ferocity emanating from her that I could recognize and respect. The smirk he returned to her had me wondering if this was personal, if she knew her opponent before the fight. Whatever fire she needed stirred to win, I hoped he ignited the fuck out of it.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the announcer said as he stepped into the ring, microphone in hand. “The moment you’ve all been waiting for! Derkin versus the Alexacutioner! Are you ready?!” The crowd cheered as bets were immediately placed around us, most of them going for the girl to win. That was a promising sigh of relief.

The announcer looked at each fighter to verify their readiness, and when both nodded, he stepped out of the cage and closed the gate. The sound of a bell initiated the fight.

Derkin moved in quickly, swinging his leg up for a kick, but I smiled as Miss Mighty Mouse narrowly dodged and pivoted to land a jab right into his groin before twisting herself around to watch him fall to his knees. The crowd went wild, screaming a sea of obscenities into the air.

Cool as a cucumber, she walked around Derkin who was still clutching his balls from the floor, her lips forming words that I couldn't catch as she looked down at him. Hopefully some decent trash talk.

From the ground, he tried to make a swing at her, forcing her to dance out of the way, a smile still fresh on her face. The swing gave him the momentum he needed to help him stand, staggering as he found his ground. From there, it was dodge and play – his arms and legs swung in all directions, anything he could do to land a hit on that girl, but the only thing he touched was air. She was fast, impressive, and entertaining to watch. I could easily understand why she was the main event. What wasn't understandable was what a giant asshole like her opponent got out of beating to death a tiny girl like her. How much was he getting paid to fight her?

As the seconds ticked by, the exhaustion of Derkin was apparent, and the more he tried to fight, the more he worked to protect that knee of his, keeping it back behind his body and away from where it might receive damage. She needed to act on that and finish the fight quickly. But as she dodged another kick, her foot slipped on a small patch of blood causing her to fall into the cage where a patron slammed his hands against the cage, suddenly capturing her attention. The slight distraction was all it took for Derkin to land one good jab against her mouth, forcing her to her knees and exposing her back to him. He took the opportunity to wrap his arm around her neck and pull her back into a rear naked choke.

Only a few yards away from where we were sitting, I could see she'd managed to tuck her blood-covered chin just in time so he couldn't complete a full choke just yet. I felt myself stiffen as I waited for her to act on his weak knee, but the only thing she seemed to focus on was keeping his arm away from her neck. My pulse quickened knowing she only had maybe a few seconds left before she lost this fight.

*Fuck that.*

Before I even had a chance to think about it, I shot out of Darren's lap and slammed my palms down on the table in front of me to grab her attention. "Strike the inner right knee!" I screamed from the top of my lungs, finally managing to make eye contact with her.

With one last breath, she swung her fist out as hard as she could and slammed against the inside of his right kneecap. Derkin released her immediately with a massive howl of pain, his screams being his only focus as she quickly squirmed out of his hold.

That was when I felt death grips on my hips as I was forced back down into Darren's lap. "What the fuck was that?" he barked into my ear, clutching me tightly.

"I didn't feel like watching her lose!" I shouted back.

"Don't do it again," he growled in warning.

The shouts of the crowd had me quickly turning back to the fight to find Derkin currently on his back with the girl pummeling his face and throat in as she straddled his chest.

"Doesn't look like I'll need to," I said with a smirk.

When she was finished with her assault on his face and he was barely moving, she stood over him, her own fists covered in his blood as she held her open palm open toward the top of the cage. An eccentric looking battle ax was then dropped into her hand. Gripping it with both hands, she looked down at her defeated opponent, smiled and lifted the ax high above her head.

The crowd roared as the ax came down over Derkin's throat, muting the crunch of his bones under the heavy blade. Blood pooled from the base of his neck onto the floor of the cage while she held the ax high into the air for all to see with one hand, eliciting more shouts and cheers for her bloody victory.

Satisfied that the fight was now over, I relaxed back in Darren's lap feeling slightly victorious myself as the Alexacutioner made her way out of the cage, bloodied battle ax still in hand. Now it made sense why they called her that.

"Well, that was interesting," Matt said as the volume of the crowd died down while they collected their winnings.

"Yes, it was," Darren said as his eyes landed on Holden who was talking to the tiny winner of the night. He looked pleased at least with her performance, considering the mess she made and the satisfaction of the

crowd. His thumb took hold of her chin to regard the split lip she probably had from the hit she took earlier. Pointing off in the direction of a random hallway, the Alexacutioner made her way out of sight, hopefully for some likely needed stitches.

That was when Holden turned his gaze back to us.

“Come on,” Darren said, gently patting my hips as we stood.

We all made our way over to Holden, who was standing proudly with his arms folded in front of his chest. “Well?” he asked, his smile annoyingly victorious.

“Let’s talk,” Darren replied.

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I gave Darren an incredulously disappointed look as he moved us to follow Holden down the hall, entering an office where we all piled in. Holden took a seat at his desk, while Darren once again pulled me onto his lap as he sat in the black leather chair across from Holden, Matt taking the second chair while Kayla sat on the couch against the wall, close enough to where Scott, Clive, and Owen and the remaining guards stood.

“So ... what did we think?” Holden asked. I didn’t like how confident he already was.

Darren relaxed in his seat even with my weight on his legs. “I can see why she’s your main attraction.”

“She puts on quite a show, doesn’t she?”

Darren nodded in agreement. “What I don’t understand are the men you find to fight her. Even with her reputation, it still wouldn’t take much for them to kill her. How do you justify the risk?”

“They aren’t allowed to kill her,” Holden answered. “If they can get her to submit before the bell rings, not only do they get a percentage of the bets, but they also get to fuck her.”

The fire in my heart immediately ignited into something fierce, the repressed anger already spreading through my body before I could even stop my fist from closing. That poor girl was fighting to prevent the unimaginable. Un-fucking-believable.

“In the ring?” Matt asked.

Holden shrugged. “If they chose to. Or they can wait until we have her cleaned up for later.”

“And she’s never lost?” Matt continued.

Holden shook his head.

“How many fights has she had?” Darren asked as his hand covered my fist that was clenched so tightly my knuckles were turning white, the only warning I would get to rein in my shit.

“Six.”

“So she’s killed six men then. If she maintains her reputation, how do you plan to get future men to continue risking their lives to fight her?”

Holden shrugged. “Because stupid men with large egos are abundant and easy to find,” he answered.

*Wow, for once I agreed with him.*

“Fair enough. So what is it you want from me then?” Darren asked.

“I need more fighters like her.”

“And you can’t find them yourself?”

Holden shook his head. “I hear you’re the expert in that department,” he replied as he glanced at me just long enough to make my skin crawl.

Jesus fuck, I was this close to exploding.

Holden leaned forward, all business now. “If you can bring me more girls like her, I’ll give you ten percent of their earnings. You’ve already stumbled across two of them by accident,” he said as he nodded toward me. “Imagine if you were actively searching for them.”

Darren had stumbled across her first? How? I was missing some serious details here.

Holden’s eyes suddenly caught mine, his gaze moving up and down with approval like I was dripping with sex and money. Fucking creep.

Darren’s shoulders shifted as he relaxed. “First, they’d have to make more money than I would in one sale in a relatively short amount of time. Just because they aren’t supposed to die in the ring doesn’t mean they won’t, not to mention you can’t guarantee how long their fighting career will last. Their bodies will only handle the hardship for so long, especially if you’re having them fight as often as I think you are. So ten percent likely won’t cut it. Second, you’re asking me to broaden my demographic, which will require more work to find qualified girls with the right stamina. Unless of course you expect some to perish for the sake of entertainment.”

“That will depend on their popularity with the crowd. Think of it like Wrestlemania but gladiator style,” Holden answered. “Eventually everyone loses their luster at some point. At least they’ll be able to go out with a bang.”

With Darren's arm wrapped around my lower back, I could feel his thumb begin to stroke along my hip in some effort to soothe me from losing it on this dipshit. It was tough enough just keeping my face completely passive.

"But I can assure you, if you bring me the right girls, I will make sure they last. They will be heavily trained, just like Alexa is, and incredibly coveted so men will want to fight them if it means they'll get a piece."

Matt smirked as he actually started to consider investing with this guy, making me want to punch him in the throat too. Darren's face was a blank fucking slate as usual. I seriously couldn't believe what I was hearing right now, and if he actually started working with this fuck, I'd absolutely lose it.

"And how exactly do you plan to motivate these girls to fight for you? How do you expect to keep them in line?" Darren asked.

Holden shrugged. "The more fights they win, the better treated they'll be. Nicer quarters, better training equipment, more freedoms."

*So he'll own them too. Fucking Hell.*

"I take it they wouldn't be able to roam free anymore?"

Holden shook his head. "No. They would belong to me and would be kept underground and under constant guard and surveillance. They would also have GPS trackers in their skin. There would be no escape. I can assure you."

"And what will you do with the ones who become too old to fight?" I asked, interrupting the conversation and silencing everyone in the room with my voice. Matt stared at me as though I'd lost my mind while Darren remained surprisingly relaxed. His eyes spoke of a thousand threats, though, if I didn't tread carefully, but I wouldn't be deterred from this.

"My wife asked you a question," Darren said as he stared Holden down. I tried not to smile from the shock of his sudden support.

Holden regarded me for a moment, surprised by my question before glancing at Darren for just a second before he smiled and answered me. "No one lives forever, Mrs. Davis. My resources will be efficiently spent on those with value."

I almost chuckled. What a bullshit answer to pacify the curious wife.

"And you anticipate their lifespan to last how long?" I continued unfazed.

"Depends on how often they fight."

"Do they have an expected quota?"



“Once a month, preferably,” he replied casually.

I shook my head, scoffing at the ridiculousness of it. “Even professional UFC fighters don’t fight that often. Once or twice a year at the most for good reason, too much wear and tear on the body. And those fights are evenly matched in weight. The effort it would take these girls to bring down men twice their size would be significant. And with so little recovery time between fights, even with adequate healthcare and dieting, you’re probably looking at a three-year lifespan max for each girl.”

Holden smiled like the goddamn devil. “By my calculation, yes.”

I relaxed my shoulders with confidence. “With each fight, their bodies will erode, and you’re either going to spend more money on their treatment or your demand for bodies will skyrocket. Sounds like an awful lot of effort and money for an investment that will only give you a return for a possibility of three years.”

It was subtle, but I caught that tiny lift in the corner of Darren’s mouth.

Holden nodded at me with a little smile. “I understand your concerns, Mrs. Davis. I have considered them myself, which is why I’m looking for at least a dozen girls to start off with. I currently have two others besides Alexa still in training, but they show much promise.”

“How old are they?” I asked.

“Nineteen and twenty.”

“Jesus, you might as well be training children,” I replied.

“The younger ones bounce back a lot faster than the older ones.”

I shook my head, absolutely disgusted. “Long term, it won’t really matter.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. There’s more than one way to skin a cat, Mrs. Davis. While I may no longer have use for them as fighters, they can still take cock just as well under someone else’s payroll.”

I hated how I had to argue this on their playing field.

“What an admirable method of recycling. Although I can’t imagine how well they’d fare, considering all the scar tissue, aggression, combative skill, and mental trauma they’d come with.”

Holden’s smile this time was as polite as it was going to get. “With all due respect, Mrs. Davis, I disagree. If they’re anything like yourself, with your beauty and capabilities, I think they will become very successful in the arena and find motivation and confidence from their wins.”

I sneered at his ignorance. “Well of course you’d think that. You find entertainment value in little girls fighting and killing men twice their size or watching them get fucked in front of a roaring crowd. But you couldn’t be more wrong.”

This guy was an idiot. He wanted women like me to fight for him, but he had no idea how much of a bad idea that was for his own lifespan.

The dark silver of his eyes narrowed at me like he was aiming for a target. “I capitalize on demand the same way your husband does,” Holden replied confidently, a shit-eating grin appearing on his face. “Some of us just happen to know how to leave our silly little emotions at home.”

I shot out of Darren’s lap before he had a chance to hold me back. “And just what will you do when the suppressed rage of your heavily trained supply swallows you whole? You think you can contain that? You keep looking at me with dollar signs in your eyes, but you have no fucking idea what you’re risking!”

“That’s enough!” Darren roared down at me as he stood and pulled me into his side.

“You see! That right there! That’s what I need!” Holden shouted excitedly, pointing at me as he stood. “That’s the fire I’m looking for!”

“You couldn’t contain this inferno if you tried!” I yelled back as I struggled against Darren’s hold. “And you want a dozen of me? Good fucking luck, bro!”

Darren ripped me away from Holden’s sneering face and began marching me away toward Clive and Owen. “Get her out of here,” he ordered as he passed me to them.

Both of my arms were immediately seized as I was dragged out into the hallway, the door slamming shut behind me.

“Jesus, do you always have to make a spectacle of things?” Clive chided as he and Owen released me.

“I’m fucking right, and you know it,” I replied, my voice seething with venom as I leaned against the wall in an attempt to calm myself down.

I probably shouldn’t have reacted the way I did. I’m sure Holden was purposely pushing my buttons, hoping for my fuse to ignite, and I let it. My self-control was shit around assholes like that, especially after hearing about his plans.

I now understood what Katherine meant when she said that sometimes being in the dark was better. Could I really handle it if I knew of every

single dark deal Darren was engaged in? How much rage could I possibly withstand before I lost it again?

Maybe being queen of this life was not in my best interests. But then again, sitting in the dark wasn't doing me any favors either.

"Making friends already?" a loud female voice hollered from the partially opened door across the hall.

Pushing off the wall, I made my way toward the door, pressing it open to see Alexa sitting on a medical table while a doctor turned back to her, apparently putting in the final touches for the stitches in her lip. Clive and Owen were already at my back ready to pull me away until they saw her and tensed slightly, unsure if she was really a threat to me. I mean, she did just decapitate a man twice her size.

The doctor finished the last stitch before putting away his tools and then exited the room. Alexa hopped off the bed and moved toward a mirror hanging on the wall to inspect the doctor's handiwork.

"Did you enjoy the fight?" she asked dispassionately as she pressed on her lip.

"It was interesting," I replied. Taking a few steps inside, I tried to keep the conversation more private. "Though I'm surprised you didn't catch the obvious vulnerability in his knee. You're welcome for that."

She turned to me with a glare in her eye. "I would have beaten him regardless."

"I would hope so. I recently discovered what you stand to lose in those fights."

"Which is why I'll never lose," she practically growled.

"I'd rather you didn't have to fight at all."

She narrowed her eyes at me with a familiar hatred. "Well, some of us don't get to live a life of privilege and luxury. Some of us have to fight just to keep breathing."

Now it was my turn to glare. "Somehow, I'm not surprised by your ignorance."

She shook her head at me with a sneer. "You really don't recognize me, do you?"

I furrowed my brows as I took a closer look at her. She was familiar, but I just couldn't place it. "You look familiar, but I can't recall from where."

She took a step away from the mirror, her eyes looking me up and down. "Can't say I'm surprised. I was the quietest one in the bunch."

A shock of ice shot from my gut up to my spine. “Where you in the same auction as me?”

Suddenly, a wave of past traumas from my days at the warehouse came crashing down onto my shoulders. All those faces I’d tried to remember as they disappeared one by one behind that door, never to be seen again, all came back like ghosts trying to haunt me. And here was one standing right in front of me, still very much alive.

She nodded solemnly. “I was among the first sold. You probably don’t remember me since I kept to myself and stayed quiet. Unlike you.”

I furrowed my brows at her, confused by the subtle insult. “Clearly, neither one of our methods left us in a favorable position.”

“I don’t know,” she said, sizing me up again. “You look like you’re doing pretty well compared to a lot of us. Nice clothes, pretty well-kept face, shiny ring, no bruises as far as I can see.”

*As far as she could see.*

I immediately stared her down. If this girl didn’t watch her ass, she’d need another set of stitches just to put her mouth back together.

“Save your judgment for someone who cares,” I nearly growled. “You have no fucking clue what I’ve endured.”

“I doubt it’s been worse than mine,” she practically seethed.

“What the fuck is this, a competition? I didn’t come here to compare our personal Hells.”

“Then you clearly don’t understand that my personal hell is because of you!” she almost shouted. “If you hadn’t fought the way you had during your auction, I wouldn’t be here! They got the idea from you!”

Was this bitch suffering from a concussion? “What the fuck are you talking about?” I said as I squared my shoulders.

“I got exactly the scenario I wanted,” she said, her eyes burning with rage. “I was purchased by a brittle old man who thought he could handle how weak and feeble I made myself look. And after weeks of waiting for the right moment, I was able to strangle him in his sleep. But of course, it had to be the same night Holden came looking for his debt the old man owed him. He saw what I’d done and took me, hoping I would have the same potential he saw in you the night of our auction.”

She moved to my left, a step closer toward the door than I was comfortable with. “Just imagine ... being so close to freedom, so close to getting your life back, and then it’s swept away all in the same night.”

And instantly her bitterness made sense. I understood what she was going through, the loss you'd feel after being so close to escape, but I refused to let her pull me down with her. I had my own internal bullshit to deal with.

"You have my sympathy but not my guilt. I have my own trauma, and you have yours. But if you need someone to blame so that it gets you through the day, then you do whatever you have to."

She smirked as she took another step toward the door. "Oh, I plan to do a lot more than that," she said and then slammed the door closed, the familiar click of a lock hitting my ears.

And just like that, she was on me.

Lifting her leg, her foot just barely cleared the side of my head as I ducked low enough and out of the way, preparing to dodge her follow-up reverse hooks and hand strikes.

"Are you fucking serious right now?" I shouted at her as I blocked her punch to my throat and catching her in a hand trap.

"Extremely," she said and shoved against me so she could lift her foot for another front kick.

"Jaden!" shouted Clive and Owen and furiously worked to break down the door.

I had to admit she was a lot better than I thought she was as we exchanged strike after strike, our blocks and counters equally matched between us, or so I thought until she managed to land a good jab against my mouth, cutting inside my lip against my teeth.

Locking her arms, I moved into her body quickly and tossed her over my hip, forcing her onto her back while my legs straddled her sides. I only managed to get in two good hits before Clive and Owen finally broke down the door and immediately pulled me off her before I could land another.

Clive held me back as I tried to lunge for her, my rage now peak level at the bullshit that just ensued. Owen held her back as she did the same.

"What the fuck is this?!" Clive screamed at both of us.

"This crazy bitch has an incredibly misplaced vendetta!" I yelled as I pointed at Alexa as she struggled against Owen.

"Like hell! What's the matter, Jaden? Afraid of a little girl-on-girl action! Maybe we should take it to the cage, huh?"

I lunged uselessly for her again. "Bitch, I would, but I'd hate to destroy Holden's most valuable asset! Get your head checked!"

“Fuck you!” she screamed back.

“Shut up, both of you!” Clive shouted at us.

At that point, I stopped struggling. There was no way they were going to let us have another go at each other, and she was already so lost in her trauma she likely wouldn’t see things from any other perspective.

When Alexa finally quieted, we were both pulled into the hallway and out into the main room to sit us both down at a table in the corner.

“Let me go!” Alexa shouted at Owen as he refused to release her.

“No fucking way. Not after that shit. We’ll wait until they’re done in there, and Holden can decide what to do with you.”

But we didn’t get much of a chance to wait because before we knew it, a major fight broke out in the remaining crowd, eliciting pandemonium and gunshots in every direction, including ours.

Today was just not a good day.

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“She’s a little firecracker, that one. Fuck, she’d be absolutely amazing in the rin—” My fist slammed into the side of Holden’s jaw before he was even finished speaking, knocking him back a few steps as he clutched the side of his face with confusion.

“That’s for deliberately baiting my wife and insulting her in the process. Don’t ever do it again, or it’ll be the last breath you take.” I waited for the recognition in his eyes to manifest, and when he finally nodded, I felt satisfied enough to continue. “Now sit the fuck down so we can actually discuss this.”

Holden cautiously moved back to his seat behind his desk while I sat back in the chair, Matt releasing a slow breath of uncertainty next to me. “Jaden makes a valid argument. The cost of maintaining a decent fighter is pricey, but the cost of maintaining several strong women like Jaden could be your life. You’re probably better off finding women who are actually willing to fight. Do what you want with them after their fighting careers are over.”

“And just where do you expect me to find them?” Holden asked unamused.

Was he really this dense?

“There are tens of thousands of young homeless women all over the country. Organize some recruiters who specialize in persuasion. If they can be recruited into prostitution, they can be recruited into this. They’ll learn self-defense skills, they’ll be housed comfortably and fed, and they’ll become famous in the underground. It won’t be hard to persuade young impressionable girls who are on the brink of desperation.”

“And what happens when they get here, lose their first fight, and decide it’s not for them anymore?”

Jesus, he really hadn’t thought of any alternatives or backup plans.

“You have them sign a contract. Remind them that they have to finish the three-year contract like they agreed. If they refuse, you can sell them to me, and they won’t be your problem anymore.”

At least now I’d get something out of it.

“And if they do finish the contract?”

I shrugged. “Sell them to me anyway. I’ll always have a buyer somewhere.”

Holden regarded me closely “So you’re willing to buy every single fighter I retire?”

I shook my head. “The deal isn’t that I buy every single fighter. The deal is I have the exclusive right of first refusal, regardless of retirement.”

“That isn’t a very secure guarantee.”

“But my connections are,” I answered. “Like I said, I always know a buyer somewhere. If I don’t want them, I will find someone who does.”

“And if you can’t?” he asked, a brow raising in apprehension.

I shrugged. “Then like you said before, some will perish for entertainment value. But only after I’ve taken my right of first refusal.”

I relaxed in my chair as I waited for Holden to decide. I didn’t want to force myself into having to buy every single girl who left this shit hole since some of them would probably end up being so fucked up it wouldn’t be worth my time and effort to turn them over for a profit. Instead, I’d collect favors from my buyers for connecting them if they made the sale, or I’d buy them myself and make some money. Could even place some decent bets if I knew they were already going to lose. Not to mention, I could cut down on my own expenses if it meant I’d have a new avenue for supply. It was a win-win either way.

“So do we have a deal?” I asked as I narrowed my gaze at him.

Holden rubbed his bruising jaw for a moment as he considered my words. After a few moments, he finally stood and held out his hand. “Deal.”

I stood and shook his hand, squeezing just enough in warning. “As a forewarning, when you make a deal with me, the moment you renege on it is the moment you forfeit far more than what you bargained for. Do you understand?”

He furrowed his brows at me as he answered hesitantly. “Of course.”



“Good,” I said with a nod.

Holden released a breath like he’d been holding it for hours. “Okay, let’s go celebrate, huh?”

Just as I nodded in agreement, the distinct sounds of glass crashing and shouts outside the door thundered through the air. My gun was already in my hand as I quickly moved toward the door, my first instinct to find Jaden while Scott, Jake, and Allan surrounded me as I ripped the door open and moved through the hallway.

It was absolute fucking chaos. A muddled sea of a hundred people where brawling each other like some kind of epic massive bar fight; every single person in the crowd we’d left behind was throwing fists as well as bodies across the room. Tables and chairs were destroyed while bottles and glasses were used as weapons to stab and bludgeon.

“What the fucking hell?” Scott commented next to me as Allan and Jake followed behind.

Ignoring him, I focused on the only thing that mattered at that very second. My eyes hunted for Jaden in the mass like a hawk for a mouse, zoning in for the slightest whip of her distinct red hair in the air until I finally found it.

She’d been tucked into the corner with Alexa while Clive and Owen physically fought off those who were around them as different brawls moved in all different areas. And of course, they had to be all the way on the other side of the room. How the fuck did they get all the way over there?

“Get to Jaden,” I ordered aloud and immediately began to move quickly through the crowd.

Shoving and ripping everyone away from my path, I got halfway through the chaos before I suddenly became a target myself. Bulldozing my way through quickly turned into deflecting punches and lunges from just about anyone in my direction, and being that I wasn’t interested in a fight, my return delivered quick fatalities.

From throwing men over my shoulder and dropping them on their heads to shattering tracheas with kicks or punches, I deflected everything that came my way. Shoulders and elbows were dislocated quickly while facial bones were pulverized into nothing as body after body fell to the floor before me.

This was a scenario where I preferred to use my gun, but I worried that pulling the trigger would set off several other triggers and send bullets flying in all directions. The risk was too great for that right now.

My eyes kept glancing back at Jaden to make sure she was still safely tucked behind Clive and Owen, my eyes catching hers every now and then before my attention eventually switched to Alexa, who had managed to slip away from the group.

But just as I finished kneeing the shit out of another man's face and dropping his dead weight, I could see a large man suddenly lunge for Alexa, grabbing her by the throat and lifting her up to shove her against the wall, but she was quick enough to wrap her small legs up around his arm, shoving her bare foot under his chin and against his neck.

But he was strong enough to hold her up with one arm while the other reached around for a hunting knife hidden at his back and held it up to Alexa's face.

*Well, there goes Holden's best investment.*

Unconcerned with Alexa's current situation, my eyes went back to Jaden before another random fuck tried to slash at me with a large knife. Capturing his wrist, I twisted it out of his hand, taking it for myself and striking him right across the belly so that when his knees hit the ground, he held his own guts in his hands.

Moving past him, I didn't see Jaden where they left her and hurriedly sought her out in the crowd until I finally saw her leap through the air onto the back of man who still had Alexa by the neck. Grabbing the fist that held the knife, she immediately pulled it back and to the side, forcing him to slit his own throat.

He dropped Alexa who landed like a cat on her feet as he crumbled beneath them both, clutching his bleeding neck.

I felt my cock stir just watching that.

But there was no time for admiration as Jaden was suddenly tackled to the ground, her back hitting the floor with a heavy thud, the wind already knocked from her lungs.

*Fuck.*

Moving quickly through the remaining crowd, I reached down to grab the hair of the man who was currently straddling her, yanked his head back and slit his throat with my own knife before ripping his crippling body off my wife. Scott, Clive, Owen, Allan, and Jake finally caught up and created

a protective barrier around us as they monitored the scene. Grabbing Jaden's hand, I pulled her from the floor keeping her incredibly close while I examined her for injuries.

"Are you hurt?" I asked, as I looked her up and down, hoping the blood I saw on her skin and clothes were from the man still bleeding to death beside her.

"No, I'm fine," she said as her chest expanded wildly before she looked around us. "Where's Alexa?"

"Fuck if I know," I replied. "She's not my concern right now."

When I was satisfied that she wasn't injured, I turned, keeping her tucked to my side like a fucking second skin as I assessed what was left of the battling crowd.

There were probably twenty lifeless bodies littering the floor, more fights continuing on the other side of the room beyond the cage where the only exit point existed.

We could make it.

Or so I thought until three of Holden's guards stepped out of the hallway, each one carrying automatic rifles and firing a quick round into the concrete ceiling to quiet everyone down. But instead of everyone calming down, it only made things so much worse.

At least five other men in the crowd pulled out their guns and immediately began firing at the guards, causing all kinds of hell.

"Get down!" I yelled as I grabbed Jaden and shoved her down to the floor behind a few tables, covering her body with mine while the rest of our party covered us with theirs.

Bullets went flying in all directions, the sharp sounds of lead piercing through the air and ricocheting off the walls. It made my fucking blood boil. If Jaden got shot, I'd absolutely fucking lose it.

Once Scott, Jake, and Allan had provided us with sufficient cover, I pulled myself off Jaden, quickly tucking her behind me as I kept us secure behind the tables. Propping myself up, I joined the rest of our party in firing back into the crowd at every person who held a gun.

In a span of probably thirty seconds, we dropped twelve people including the three guards who had started the whole damn thing until the last gunshot echoed throughout the room and silence remained.

"Stay down there," I told Jaden as the rest of us slowly stood, guns in each hand and aimed out in front of us. Jesus, my ears were fucking ringing

like crazy, the dull sound distracting as I scanned the room.

All that was left were the dead.

“Fuck,” Clive moaned, catching our attention. Both he and Owen were currently hunched over on the ground, blood seeping through their shirts and pant legs.

Holstering our guns, Scott and I quickly looked both of them over, finding Clive had a bullet in the back of his thigh, another just below his shoulder blade, and a third in his side. Owen had a bullet in his arm, another went through his shoulder, another just below the right side of his collarbone, and another had grazed across the back of his calf. They’d live, but they were in no shape to be looking after Jaden.

“Fuck, we need to move,” I said, hoisting Clive up from the floor while Scott did the same for Owen. Handing them off to Allan and Jake, I caught sight of Matt and Kayla carefully making their way out of Holden’s office.

“What the fuck happened?” he nearly shouted as they made their way toward us.

“Nice of you to join the party,” I replied, glaring at him. I could have used his help.

“Like I have a fucking reason to join,” he retorted as he looked us over, noticing the state of Clive and Owen.

“Where’s Holden?” I asked as I grabbed Jaden’s hand and started moving us toward the exit.

“Still in his office,” he answered as he pulled a paler-than-usual Kayla along with him. It probably didn’t help that she was currently trying to maneuver around the bloody bodies littering the floor. “We watched everything from the cameras inside where you should have stayed.”

“Sorry, I had someone to extract,” I nearly growled in reply, holding up Jaden’s hand as we moved toward the stairs, earning myself a nice glare from her.

“Well, if she had kept her damn mouth shut, she wouldn’t have been out there in the first place,” Matt added.

“Oh, fuck you, Rainer,” Jaden griped as I we reached the top of the stairs.

Gripping her hand to the point of pain, I yanked her to my side and glowered down at her. “None of that shit.”

Ignoring the death glare she gave me, I kept us moving until we were outside by the cars and addressed everyone.

“Scott, take Clive and Owen to The Cellar and have their medical team treat them. Jake and Allan, you take Kayla and Jaden back to the hotel and stay there. Matt, I need you to help me figure out what the fuck happened here. We need to find Holden.”

Allan tossed me the spare key to the car he drove earlier before helping Scott maneuver Clive and Owen into the backseat of the other vehicle. Matt didn’t say a word as he brought Kayla to one side of the SUV Jake was waiting to pull away in while I moved Jaden to the other side. “I’ll be back later. Don’t start any shit.”

She rolled her eyes, turning only to glance at Scott driving off with her wounded bodyguards. “Keep your eyes out for Matt’s enemies too. He told Kayla to stay close to me earlier. I don’t like what that implies.”

*Fuck. That was the last thing I needed to worry about right now.*

“Thanks for the update. Now be a good girl and watch your ass,” I said as I grabbed her hips and pulled her to me, my lips devouring hers like I was fucking starved. I couldn’t wait to get her back to the estate where she’d be safe again behind locked doors.

“Go,” I said, releasing her so she could climb into the back seat of the armored vehicle.

Slamming the door shut, I stepped away and watched Allan drive them off, leaving the dust to fly in the air between me and Matt.

“Come on, let’s go find out what the fuck happened,” I said to Matt as he nodded and followed suit.

Making our way back into the building and down to the bottom floor, we found Holden shouting orders to several men who were grabbing the bodies from the floor and throwing them on top of flatbed carts to wheel them out of the room.

His head snapped up when he noticed us. “What the fuck are you two still doing here?”

“I need to know how this stupid chaos started,” I replied, waving my hands at the mess surrounding us. I needed to make sure it wasn’t a failed attempt to gain my attention from someone new, or someone old.

“Alcohol. Mystery solved. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“Did you check your security tapes yet?” Matt interjected.

“What? No, why would I?” He genuinely looked confused. He could not seriously be this naïve.

“Because you want to confirm this wasn’t deliberate, you jackass. Now, where are your tapes?” I snarled.

His scowl only lasted a second before he realized we were right and gestured for us to follow him. Moving back into his office, he pulled up the security tapes and began playing it right after I kicked Jaden out of his office. There were ten different cameras spread throughout the lower level of the vicinity, each one capturing a different angle wide enough to cover every inch of the floor. We played the tapes several times over, looking for the instigator of the fight, but while Matt and Holden looked for a specific culprit, I looked for the less obvious.

I looked for the loners, the watchers, the ones standing off to the side to quietly observe from the shadows, but the harder I looked, the less likely it was I would find what I was looking for.

“What the fuck ...?” Holden finally mumbled under his breath.

“What?” I asked as I turned my gaze to the box he was focused on. He rewound the tape a few seconds and played it again, pointing at the screen. “That’s one of my high-level security guards talking to one of my bookies. He tells him something and then walks away. And then my bookie just happens to be working with one of the most violent hotheaded fuckers in the place, and that’s when the first fight begins. One right after the other with the bookies. What the fuck did he say to him?”

“Did he survive the shootout?”

“Let’s find out,” Holden said, pulling out his phone and making a call. “Find Bruster if he’s still alive,” he said and hung up.

After ten irritating minutes of reviewing more of the tapes, the security guard was finally shoved through the door where it was quickly closed behind him. He looked nervous. Good.

“What the fuck did you say to Leon before that shitshow broke out?” Holden asked him.

He lifted his brows in confusion. “What do you mean?” he asked.

I didn’t have time for this shit.

Charging over to the guard, I grabbed his neck and slammed him into the wall, placing just enough pressure on his throat for him to know I was serious.

“Listen, shithead, I don’t have time for your bullshit. So you answer the questions honestly, or I’ll make sure the next seven days of your life are nothing but hell before I kill you myself. And no amount of information

you reveal will save you.” I gave him another quick squeeze. “Do you understand?”

He attempted to nod but only managed a garbled yes.

Releasing just enough pressure so he could breathe, Bruster sucked in a breath before he started panting.

“What did you tell the bookie before the fight broke out?” I asked.

He took in several more breaths before he answered. “T-that all the bets were bad and were to be forfeited.”

“Who the fuck told you to say that?” Holden nearly shouted.

“Alexa did,” he answered.

“What? When?” Holden continued.

“Just before she saw the doc. Told me you said to pull the bets in twenty minutes.”

“And you fucking *believed her?!* ” Holden shouted as he took several menacing steps toward us.

Bruster tried to shrug but didn’t have much mobility. “She’s your right-hand prize. I had no reason to think she was lying,” he groaned.

“Jesus fuck!” Holden shouted as he turned back to his desk for his phone, making another call. “Find Alexa. Now.” Holden stopped for a moment as he stared off into the air as he listened to whoever he was talking to. “What do you mean you haven’t been able to find her?”

Recollection came to as I released Bruster from the wall, his hands immediately moving to rub his throat as I moved toward Holden.

“I saw her in the chaos out there. Some guy attacked her. My wife killed him, but I don’t know where she ran to after that.”

Holden’s face grimaced with rage as he took in my words. “That little fucking bitch!”

I almost smirked. *Welcome to the party, asshole.*

An unfamiliar buzz triggered my phone, breaking my focus as I pulled it from my pocket to find an alert that Jaden’s GPS signal was no longer active. It was completely silent. Alarm swarmed through my entire body as I tried to reset the satellite signal, hoping it was some bullshit glitch, but nothing brought the signal back.

“Matt, do you have Kayla’s GPS location?” I asked, trying to keep calm.

He looked confused as he pulled out his phone and scrolling through it until a deep frown set in his face.

“No. What the fuck?”

I immediately dialed both Allan and Jake, nearly throwing my phone through the wall when neither one of them answered after the tenth call.

“We need to go,” I said to Matt. “Good luck with your search, Holden,” I added and quickly stormed from the room, my next call being to Scott.

“Yeah?” he said answering.

“Do you know if they made it back to the hotel?”

He didn’t even pause. “I haven’t received an update.”

“Fuck! Jaden’s signal is dead.”

I could hear him already shuffling around for his shit. “I’ll retrace the road,” he said and hung up.

By the time I made it up the stairs, I raced to the third remaining car, leaving Matt to catch up behind me. Ripping the driver’s side door open, I started the engine, giving Matt a second to get into the passenger seat before I backed the SUV up and flew out of the lot.

I followed the road for a good ten minutes before I caught the remnants of a car on its side a few yards off the dirt road. Pulling over, I could see the SUV Jaden and Kayla left in, the entire vehicle flipped completely over, massive dents everywhere, and fucking scratches from ricocheting bullets.

Jaden and Kayla gone, and the bullet-riddled bodies of both Jake and Allan were left behind. A large puddle of blood gathered near the car with drag marks leading away from it, but no body to go with it, though. Hopefully, that meant they at least killed one of them.

“Fuck!” Matt shouted as he took in the scene, his eyes lingering on the pair of delicate silver heels left in the dirt.

It took all my strength not to let my rage get the best of me as I searched for answers. The biggest dent was in the driver’s side, indicating that another much larger car had hit them from the left, rolling them over until they landed upside down. The car was bulletproof with a blast proof undercarriage, so there should have been no reason for any of them to have even left the vehicle.

I drew my gun as the lights of another vehicle approached and quickly holstered it when I saw Scott behind the wheel, pulling to the side of the road and climbing out to join us.

“Well fuck,” he said as he looked over the wreck.

“Whoever took them knew about the tech of their collars and had the capability to block their signals. Otherwise, they would have just cut them



off and left them here,” I said aloud.

“There are two different sets of tire tracks over here,” Scott said as he observed the ground. “They had two vehicles.”

*Fuck.*

And with only two guards, they would have been easily outnumbered.

Forcing myself to steady my rising blood pressure and the panic boiling in my chest, I thought back to the last thing Jaden said to me before they drove off. Matt had enemies too. And they knew our tech.

“Matt,” I said turning to him and he stared hopelessly at the wreck. “Jaden told me you wanted Kayla stay close to her. Was someone threatening Kayla?”

He didn’t respond, just continued to stare on.

Grabbing him by the shoulders, I shook him as I turned him to me. “Matt, look at me and get your head back in the game. Was someone threatening Kayla?” I practically growled at him.

“Indirectly,” he replied.

“*WHO?*” I nearly shouted, ready to rip his fucking head off for keeping this kind of information from me.

“Tony Graves,” he answered.

I stepped back and absorbed his answer. Tony Graves was the manufacturer of the collars, a person we set up for the job. Why in the fuck would he go after Matt like this knowing what he was jeopardizing?

“Why? Why would he threaten Kayla? What did you do?”

“Darren,” Scott called as he looked over his phone, claiming my attention. “I missed this notification. The *Lobos* attacked three neighboring towns, left dozens dead.”

“When?” I asked.

“Three days ago.”

Scott then showed me an image on his phone from our security system showing Matt’s same representative standing in front of a covered flatbed truck while members of the *Lobos* carried away ammo cans and large black duffle bags.

*Son of a bitch.*

I didn’t even think, just reared back and struck my fist into Matt’s face and knocking him to the ground.

“You made that fucking deal,” I seethed as I struck him again. “You went behind my back, after I told you not to engage with them, and you

sold them that weaponry.” Grabbing the lapels of his jacket, I hauled him up from the ground. “Why?!”

He groaned as he attempted to get his jaw to work. “Because I thought you were just being paranoid,” he answered as blood trickled down his chin from the busted lip I just gave him.

“And once again, my paranoia was spot on. Now, how the fuck does Tony Graves fit into this?”

Matt spat out the blood that was also filling his mouth as I released him to stand on his own. “His niece was down there on some charity mission. She was killed in the crossfire. Tony blames me and threatened action if I didn’t return his calls.”

*Jesus fuck.*

“And you didn’t want to tell me because you’d have to admit you *fucked up*.”

“I thought he was bluffing. No way would he want to fuck with us like that.”

Astounded, I stepped away from him, placing my hands over my hips to keep them from striking Matt again. A massive hurricane of rage, disappointment, and betrayal, stormed inside me, threatening to blow through the increasingly fragile surface of my calm exterior. I couldn’t believe the utter display of arrogance and stupidity. Had Matt been anyone else, I probably would have killed him already for what he had jeopardized. If anything happened to Jaden, I still may – friendship be damned.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Matt,” Scott muttered as he started making phone calls to organize clean up.

Turning back to Matt, I looked down at the closest thing I had to a friend, a man who now appeared completely lost and hopeless as he took in the wreck before us, hunched in disbelief at the consequences of his actions.

And now, I would have to be the one to clean up his fucking mess.

In one long stride, I grabbed him by his jacket and turned him to face me. “You had better hope that Graves doesn’t touch a single hair on Jaden’s body, because if anything happens to her, we’re done. Do you understand?”

All Matt could do was nod.

“Good. Now get Graves on the fucking phone so I can fix this.”

And by fix, I mean decimate the fuck out of Tony Graves for fucking with what’s mine.

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“Jaden. Jaden wake up,” a familiar feminine voice called to me. I groaned, wanting to tell it to fuck off, but my mouth felt like it was made of rubber. “Come on, Jaden, wake your bitch ass up!”

*Excuse me, bitch?*

That had my attention.

My senses slowly started coming back to me, my entire body aching as I came to realize I was lying on a concrete floor. Reality mixed with déjà vu slapped me right in the face.

Hadn’t I literally just done this?

“What. The. Fuck,” I managed to slur as I lifted my heavy arms to my face, wincing with every move as my face burned from the touch.

“Finally. I’ve been trying to wake you forever,” came Kayla’s rattled voice to my right.

Cracking open my eyes, my vision blurred to focus as I looked her over, a feeling of icy dread shooting through my veins as I took in her current state. She was covered in dirt, scrapes and bruises, her hair a complete mess, her dress torn and filthy and her shoes were missing. There were specs of dried blood on her arms and a massive cut around her hairline, and her bottom lip was busted open and swollen.

What the fuck happened???

Forcing myself to sit up, I was grateful there was a wall directly behind me as I rested my stiff spine against it. Looking around, we were in some kind of concrete room with a metal security gate being the only thing locking us in. It was almost as if we were in some kind of storage unit.

“Goddammit.”

Assessing myself, I looked down at my bare legs to find them mirroring Kayla's, dirty and covered in scrapes, blood, and a shit ton of bruises. Thankfully, my boots were still on. My arms matched my legs, but I was glad to see my knuckles on both hands were bloody and bruised.

At least I'd given someone some shit in the process.

I turned my gaze to Kayla who was looking at me with concern and terror. "Are you okay?" I asked as I got my mouth to work.

"I'm fine, but I fucking told you I had a bad feeling," she said with a scowl. "Are you okay? You're really bruised up."

"I bruise easily," I replied as I took a deep breath, finding relief that nothing felt tight or sharp as I inhaled. "Comes with the territory," I added, tugging at my red hair.

"Right." She nodded, but as she did, the dim light from the singular bulb above us caught the shine from her collar. She was still wearing it, and a quick assessment told me I was still wearing mine as well – another conclusion of one of two things: really smart kidnappers or really dumb ones.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked her.

"Maybe twenty minutes."

"Have you seen anyone?"

She shook her head. "It's been quiet. But I haven't screamed for anyone yet either. I figured that camera over there would have alerted someone that we were awake."

I looked in the direction she was pointing, noticing the black lens with the little red light on it. I hated playing the waiting game.

"What do you remember?" I asked her.

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled as she leaned back against the wall next to me, her eyes glazing over as she tried to focus.

"I remember the sound of metal crunching," she said, and the moment she said it a flood of memories hit me. "I remember a sharp jerk."

"We were in a car accident," I stated, the flashbacks becoming clearer.

She nodded. "Yeah, I think we rolled completely over."

"It came from the left side. I remember the headlights now."

Kayla nodded vigorously. "Yeah, I remember the blood rushing to my head from hanging upside down from the seat belt."

"And then the gunfire came," I said, remembering the brash sounds of the bullets ricocheting off the car.

“I remember the noise now. How loud it was.”

“I think our driver was killed on impact, and then Allan opened his side of the door to shoot back.”

“Yeah, yeah I remember seeing him hanging limply now.”

“Can you remember the faces?” I asked. They were all blurry to me. I only remembered big men with guns.

She shook her head. “Not really. Men like that all look the same to me. I think there were four or five of them, though.”

I nodded in agreement.

Kayla then started chuckling quietly to herself, causing me to raise a brow at her.

“I just remembered you punched one of them in the mouth because he called you a little cunt.”

I snorted. “That might explain this then,” I said, holding my fist up and exposing my torn knuckles.

Kayla smiled and then immediately froze as another memory hit her. “You killed one of them. I think you managed to get one of their guns, and you shot him in the face.”

I thought long and hard, searching deep in the back of my head for that one. The feeling of a struggle started to resurface, my arms flailing until my hands gripped a weapon at someone’s waist.

“I think I remember that now.”

And then the sharp pain of a needle pricking my skin came back to memory, my vision going dark after that.

I shook my head in irritation as I recognized the irony of it. “We really gotta stop waking up like this, Kayla.”

She snorted a laugh. “Agreed.”

Over the next hour, I spent the first twenty minutes looking over the room we were in. It wasn’t very spacious, but there was enough room for me to stretch out all the kinks in my body as I learned as much as I could about our location.

The only thing visible was the wall on the other side of the hallway we were clearly being held in. Pressing against the security gate, I could push out only about an inch to see a door a few meters down the hall to my right and more hallway to my left. Definitely felt like we were locked in a storage unit.

Pure boredom eventually got the better of me, so I decided to conserve my energy and sat back down next to Kayla against the wall.

“So what happened after I got booted from the room back there?” I asked her.

Kayla gave me a little smile. “Darren actually agreed with you.”

My brows rose of their own accord. “Really?”

“Yeah, said they were better off finding willing women.”

This was surprising.

“He ended up making another deal, though,” Kayla continued. “He basically has the right of first refusal to purchase the ‘retired’ fighters.”

“Goddamn him,” I replied. I did everything I could to point out how stupid that “business proposition” was, but of course Darren would figure out some way to turn it around in his favor. Fuck.

“What the hell happened after you got booted? You leave and suddenly the whole place goes to hell?”

I’d just realized I hadn’t had the chance to tell her about Alexa.

“You remember the female fighter we watched?”

Kayla nodded.

“You didn’t recognize her either, did you?”

Her brows furrowed together in confusion before she shook her head.

“She was in the same auction we were.”

Kayla’s eyes bulged in surprise. “But I don’t remember her at all.”

“Neither do I, but I guess that was her intention. She didn’t want to attract any attention to herself. I guess she was successful.”

“So how did she end up there?”

“She got sold to some old fuck, and the same night she finally strangled him in his sleep, Holden came to collect a debt from the old man. He saw what she’d done and thought she would be capable of more, so he took her and turned her into that.”

“Damn,” Kayla whispered under her breath.

“Yeah and what’s worse is she blames me for it. She said Holden got the idea from when I fought the guards during my sale. And she actually tried to fight me because of it.”

“She did what?!” Kayla screeched. “You actually fought her?”

“Yeah, she’s actually a damn good fighter too. But Clive and Owen broke us up before we could really tear into each other.”

“Wow, what a crazy bitch,” Kayla replied.

I shrugged. "Maybe she's right. Maybe it is my fault."

I couldn't help but struggle with all the what-ifs that were currently battling each other in my head. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut and my head down. God knows Darren probably would have passed me up, Megan would likely still be alive, and Alexa might have secured her freedom.

I was so impulsive then, so radical in my mission to remain undefeated and stay above the surface when I should have just learned to breathe underwater. Maybe then I could have breached the surface when it was safe again. But it was too late to change the past.

"Hey, don't do that. It's not your fault. There's no way you could have known what would happen."

I shook my head. "I was stupid then," I retorted as the regret started to swim through my veins.

"No, you weren't. You gave a lot of us hope when we had none."

"Yeah, and what did that do for all of you?" I said, turning to her. "We're back in a fucking cage again." I shook my head and started to laugh at the craziness of it all.

"Hey, you gotta look at the upside. At least it's a lot bigger than last time."

I snorted before fully laughing out loud. "You're right. We finally got an upgrade."

We chuckled for a moment before we went back to being silent as we waited for whoever brought us there to make themselves known.

It didn't take very long for me to become impatient again as I stood and started to pace back and forth while Kayla sat bored against the wall. What the hell were they waiting for? This couldn't have been random. They had to know who we were; otherwise, our collars would have revealed our location and this place would have been under siege by now.

As much as I hated to admit it, I wondered what Darren was doing to find us and if he was going out of his mind with the raw, unrestrained rage I'd witnessed earlier. After seeing him tear through people left and right to get to me during that massive brawl like it was effortless to him, I feared for anyone he might see as a threat. I remembered staring in awe as he destroyed everyone in his path in seconds.

His obsessive possessiveness over me might actually come in handy for once. But if he wasn't here by now doing the same thing, then he either



didn't know where we were, or he was dealing with a stronger adversary than I thought. Our kidnappers were apparently more sophisticated than I had hoped.

Finally, after what felt like hours, the sound of a door creaked open and slammed shut followed by the echo of heavy boots headed our way. Kayla nearly rushed to my side as three men dressed in black military gear stood before the security gate and watched us for a moment.

I folded my arms, irritated that they were purposely stalling and stared back, noticing the M16s slung over their shoulders, the Glocks at their hips, and the hunting knives strapped to their thighs. A lot of weaponry for people just standing around and watching.

"All right, are you guys just gonna stand there and be weird, or is someone going to tell us why the fuck we're here?"

The middle one of them stepped forward. "And just who the fuck are you exactly?"

I raised a brow in confusion. Was he serious? How did they not know who they'd taken?

"You guys miss the memo on who you were kidnapping or something?"

"We know who she is," he said, pointing at Kayla. "But we need to confirm who you are."

*So they were originally after Kayla. If they didn't know who I was, why didn't they just leave me behind?*

"Why didn't you leave me behind then if you didn't know who I was?"

He glared at me. "Just answer the fucking question, bitch," he growled.

Grinding my teeth, I wanted to punch myself in the mouth for what I was about to say, but I needed to know if it meant anything to these assholes. "Jaden Davis ... *bitch*."

The middle one's eyes narrowed as the other two behind him raised a brow. "Prove it," he said. "Show me the ink."

Wow, I was known for that? It was a pretty defining tattoo, but I didn't know it was that significant.

Walking closer, I nearly slammed my wrist against the metal gate in rage so he could clearly see the tattoo on my wrist with Darren's name perfectly inked into my skin. Once he got a good look, I turned my wrist over to give him the middle finger and show off the giant diamond ring on my ring finger.

“You wanna see his carved initials on my ass too?” I asked bluntly and stepped back.

That seemed to be enough to get his attention because he cursed under his breath as he reached inside his side pocket. Revealing a set of keys, the two guards behind him drew their guns to point them in my direction as the middle guard crouched to unlock the gate at the floor and lifted it.

*How flattering.*

“All right, Red, you come with me. Blondie, you stay put,” he said, pointing at Kayla who stayed where she was.

“Why just me?” I asked as I slowly stepped toward the opening he created for me to step through.

“There’s been an accidental mix-up,” he answered. “Now hold out both your hands.”

I had two options at this point. I could take all three of them out and try to make a break for it for me and Kayla, or I could learn a little more about our captor and this apparent “accidental mix-up” and make a likely much more successful break for it.

Holding both my hands out, I went with the latter, allowing the guard to place zip ties over my wrists. I tried not to smile as he pulled the loop tight.

*Fucking amateurs.*

“Be right back,” I said to Kayla as they shut the gate and led me forward.

“Have fun,” she said sarcastically as I was walked down the hall and through the doorway with two guns pointing at my back.

“On our way,” the lead guard said into the walkie-talkie attached to his vest.

The second we were through the door, my eyes took in every square inch I could find. Noticing the minimal cameras, the empty halls we walked down, and the several lefts and rights we made down each hallway that resembled the ones a storage facility might have. I made a note of every hallway, every door, every camera, and every guard we passed until we finally made our way through a set of wooden double doors that led into a sort of conference room.

An older man sat at the head of the table as I was placed at the seat at the opposite end. Dressed in a light gray suit, he had thick white hair that had been combed over to the side, the deep wrinkles around his eyes revealing his age as he appeared a little tense in his chair.

“Hello, Mrs. Davis,” he said politely. “My name is Anthony, but you can call me Tony.”

“Jaden,” I corrected with a nod.

*I fucking hated when people called me Mrs. Davis.*

“Very well,” he said with a nod. “Jaden it is.”

“Care to explain where we are, and what I’m doing here, *Tony*?” I asked, keeping my voice even.

He released a heavy breath as he relaxed his shoulders. “Well, Jaden, I’m sorry to say there seems to have been a bit of a mix-up here. My men were sent after a blonde, not a redhead. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

I raised a brow at him and snorted at him. This was the threat Matt was worried about for Kayla. “You call *this* an inconvenience?”

He shrugged. “I literally just got off the phone with your husband and negotiations for your release have been secured. We’ll be moving you to another location for your extraction within the hour.”

He’d already spoke to Darren? Well, this was completely unexpected.

“I’m sure he was pleased to hear that,” I said through gritted teeth.

“As pleased as you can imagine,” he replied, the tone of his voice hinting at the obvious unpleasantness of that call. “I can only hope our business relations will survive after this.”

Hope lingered in his tone as he looked at me, giving me the impression that he thought I might have some sway in getting Darren to forgive him. It was laughable. This dude was a walking corpse.

“And what business would that be?” I asked politely.

He nodded at my collar. “Thanks to that beautiful piece around your neck, Mr. Davis will never have to fear losing you to one of his many enemies. You can guarantee you will always be found.”

I raised a brow. “You’re not very good at recognizing irony, are you?”

He narrowed his eyes at me in obvious confusion. “I don’t follow.”

I shook my head. “Clearly,” I replied. “You just said he never has to fear losing me to any of his enemies ... unless that enemy is *you*.”

At my words, he quickly shook his head in denial as if this whole thing was just a big misunderstanding and an easy fix. “But I’m not his enemy.”

“So *you* say, but your *actions* prove otherwise. You successfully took me away from him. That makes you a threat. And he doesn’t allow threats to linger for very long.”

I could see sweat start to line his hairline before he quickly wiped it away. “Well, if he wants to continue doing business with me and maintain your collar, he will have to forgive this little mishap.”

*How cute.*

“Do you have a business partner?” I asked.

He scoffed at my question. “What does that have to do with anything?” he asked, the anger in his voice proving I was getting to him.

“Anyone who could easily assume the helm?”

He grew silent as he stared at me, the realization of how screwed he was hitting him square in the face.

“Thought so,” I said, a tiny smile growing at the corner of my lips. I folded my bound hands over the table and leaned forward, far more confident than I should be. “If you want me to vouch for you, then I need something in return.”

Tony finally found his balls and began to chuckle. “Something in return? How about your safe return in one piece?”

I smiled at him. “That’s cute, but the fact that I was led here with guns trained at my back tells me you already know I’m not someone you want to risk a physical altercation with.” Tony’s lips formed one thin line as he considered my words. “I also imagine that if Darren knew where I was, this place would be nothing but rubble by now,” I said, tapping my collar, attempting to draw out the reason I was still wearing it. “So obviously, he doesn’t, and I want to know how.”

Tony was clearly becoming uncomfortable as he shifted in his seat, but I wanted that information, and I would get it one way or another.

“We’re the designers and sole manufacturers of those collars,” he said as he nodded at me. “So obviously we would also possess the tech to block those signals.”

*Now we’re talking.*

“That tech wouldn’t happen to be portable, would it?” I asked, giving him a smirk.

Tony reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small black device, about the size of a thumb drive, holding it up for me to see.

*Now there’s a good boy.*

“Incredibly portable, actually,” he said, rather proudly as if he were showing off. “Transmitting signals that disrupts the one coming from yours

is beyond simplistic. As long as you're within one square mile of it, your signal can't be traced. Just a simple on and off switch, really."

"So I'm assuming that's not the only one?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, we have dozens of these back at the main office."

I smiled. "Good to know," I replied as I watched him place the little device back into his pocket.

Tony suddenly stood. "Well, if that's everything, I just wanted to personally apologize for the misunderstanding and let you know we've rectified the issue. I do hope Mr. Davis will forgive this little mix-up after your safekeeping, *accommodations*, and prompt return."

I almost laughed at him. "Sit back down, Tony, we're not finished. What about Kayla's release? Why did you even want her in the first place?"

Tony was uncomfortably silent for a moment before he answered. "She'll remain here until negotiations with Mr. Rainer have been secured."

*My ass, she will.*

I wasn't leaving this building without her.

"Trouble with your distributors then?" I could only imagine she was being used as collateral.

He stared at me for a moment, his lips turning into a thin line before he answered. "Just a slight disagreement between associates, Jaden. Nothing for you to worry about."

I scoffed. "Well, if this slight disagreement puts my friend's well-being in jeopardy, you can imagine I have every reason to worry about that."

Tony stopped for a moment as he regarded me closely, the wheels of exploitation turning in his head.

"You're not much for subtly, are you, Jaden?" he commented, a hint of curiosity behind his voice.

I narrowed my gaze at him. "No."

He then sucked in a breath and took a step towards me. "In that case, allow me to clarify your assumptions then. My niece was killed a few days ago and Mr. Rainer is directly responsible for that. So, if the concern for your friend's well-being is as great as you say it is, then I suggest you do all you can to convince your husband to ensure Mr. Rainer agrees to my terms. Do we have an understanding now?"

Absorbing his words, I kept my face passive while my stomach plummeted to the floor. Things just got a shit ton more complicated.

“Sorry to hear about your niece,” I offered genuinely. “But did you and Darren not discuss the release of Kayla as well?”

Tony gave me a sad smile. “Your husband’s concern was for you and you alone. However, he expects Mr. Rainer will realize what matters to him most and come around.”

It was a challenge to hide my fury. Darren was willing to leave Kayla behind to die if it meant getting me back in one piece. He didn’t care about her; he didn’t care that her well-being was a concern of mine. He didn’t care that I would be affected by what happened to her. Fucking selfish bastard. Fine then. I would get Kayla out of here myself – without his fucking help. And after I finished tearing this whole goddamn building down, we would see who was “ready” then.

Tony straightened his jacket and then headed toward the door. “Again, I’m terribly sorry for the mix-up here and hope this kind of misunderstanding doesn’t befall us again in the future. I trust Mr. Davis will see reason through your own favorable convictions.”

*What an absolute moron. Tony Graves was fucking dead.*

Tony then nodded to the guards who lifted me by my arms from the chair and escorted me out of the room, taking the same route as we came, guns still pointing at the back of my head.

Anger simmered through my veins at the idea that Darren would negotiate for my release but not Kayla’s. Of course, I couldn’t always jump to conclusions here. For all I knew, the whole thing was a lie, and Darren was planning on crashing the party before I did, assuming he even knew where I was, but judging by the circumstances, it didn’t sound like he did. Either way, I was not leaving Kayla behind for them to do God knows what to her in order to get Matt to comply with their demands.

One way or the other, I was going to have to somehow break us out of here.

But first, I needed to get my hands on that cloaking device.

Which meant I needed a plan.

Looking around the hallway for literally any kind of inspiration, passing two more guards, my eyes suddenly caught sight of the purple pipe that ran along the ceiling – their central heating system.

Which meant their gas line was attached to it somewhere. That would take care of the building in about a half hour if I was super diligent about what I needed to do.

That meant I couldn't use guns once I cut the line.

*Fuck, this was going to get messy.*

As soon as we were back in front of the security gate, my plan articulated enough for me to take action, I made my move. With as much strength and speed as I could muster, I lifted my arms to bring my wrists down against my pelvis to snap the zip ties off. In the same motion, I swiftly turned around to grip the gun of the guard behind me at my right, instantly aiming it at the leading guard and pulling the trigger a millisecond before kicking the gun out of the hands of the third guard.

Maintaining my grip on the gun, I quickly kicked that guard in the side of the knee, distracting him enough to disarm the gun from his hand, shooting him in the knee before aiming it at the second guard who was distracted trying to retrieve his own gun from the floor. He dropped a second later.

"What the hell?!" Kayla shouted as she ran toward the gate, her eyes bulging as she took in the dead bodies.

Training my gun on the guard I spared, he stared up at me from the floor, clutching his bleeding leg and trying not to scream.

"How many guards are there?" I asked.

His chest expanded rapidly as he answered through gritted teeth. "Fuck you, bitch, I'm not telling you shit."

Aiming my gun to the left, I pulled the trigger and added another bullet to his other leg. The sound of the gunshot painfully pulsed in my ears. He screamed in pain as he took in more breath, blood now pooling around both his legs.

"Try again," I said, trying to keep myself calm while the adrenaline rushed through my veins.

His lip curled in disgust as he glared at me, and it was all the motivation I needed to aim my gun at his left shoulder. "You want another one? Or should I just kill you slowly instead?" I threatened.

That seemed to get his attention. "Okay," he murmured. "Forty. There are forty guards here." And then he smirked.

I rolled my eyes and stepped on his leg, right over the bullet wound. I didn't need him bleeding out too quickly with another gunshot wound.

"Ah! Stop! Get off!" he shouted at me as he sucked in air, his chest bulging up and down as he tried to weakly push my foot off his wound, but it only made me dig in deeper.

“Only one way to make me, dipshit,” I replied as I waited for him to give me what I wanted.

“Okay! Okay! Twenty! There are twenty!” he shouted through gritted teeth, to which I lessened some of the pressure, but not all of it.

Kayla slammed her palms against the security gate behind me, grabbing my attention. “He’s probably still lying,” she called. “Make the odds sound worse so we surrender. You should just shoot him in the dick. He’s probably useless.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I agreed and raised the barrel of my gun to his crotch.

“No, wait!” the guard shrieked, holding his palms up in desperation. “Okay. There are only fifteen of us.”

I rolled my eyes. “You could be lying about that too, genius.”

“It’s true, I swear!”

“We don’t have time for this,” Kayla reminded me.

“No, here,” he said, “my phone is in my pocket. It has a map of the facility as well as the personnel schedule.”

*Now that had my attention.*

“Show me,” I ordered.

“My leg, please,” he pleaded with me.

I begrudgingly removed my foot as his shaking hands slowly moved toward the chest pocket of his vest, pulling out a slick black phone and unlocking it with his index finger. I watched every move he made on that screen, making sure he wasn’t carefully calling for help. When a white looking map popped up, he handed me the phone.

True to his word, the blueprint matched the hallways they led me through, the storage units, and the conference room.

“What is this place? A storage facility or something?”

The guard nodded. “Basically, yeah.”

They weren’t going to have very many happy clients after this.

“Show me where your security room is,” I said, holding the phone out in my hand for him to point. Tentatively, his finger shook over a small room at the north east corner of the building.

“And we’re here, right?” I asked, pointing at where I thought we currently were. I hoped I was right because that would mean the security room wasn’t too far away.

Relief was too brief when he nodded.



“Now show me on here where Tony would be.”

“Ah, come on, I don’t know where he is,” the guard whined.

“He has an office somewhere, doesn’t he?”

He hesitated for a moment before he eventually nodded. “Fine,” he murmured, pointing at the screen of the phone, showing that his office was all the way on the other side of the goddamn building.

“Good. Now the last thing I need is the password to your phone.”

The guard went suddenly visibly white. “But it’s fingerprint protected.”

My stomach curdled just a little.

*Fuck.*

“Any chance you can change the password to not need your fingerprint?” I asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

He slowly shook his head. “They’re standard issued. I don’t have control over it.”

*Bad luck for you, bro.*

“Maybe you can change the auto lock so that the screen never times out,” Kayla suggested.

“Yeah, but if I accidentally hit the power button, it’ll lock the screen, and I won’t be able to access it,” I reminded her.

“Shit,” she whispered under her breath. “Sorry, dude,” she called out to the guard.

I wasn’t sure why she was bothering. I couldn’t allow him to live after seeing us anyway.

“Well, fuck the both of you then! You bitches are seriously no better than the cunts downstairs. We should have just dumped you in there with them.”

My eyes narrowed at him, his words unsettling inside me. “Say what now?”

“Fuck you, that’s what now,” he growled.

Freshly enraged, I drew the hunting knife from his pocket, grabbed his ear, and held the blade against the cartilage.

“How much more pain do you want to experience before I put a fucking hole through your skull?” I roared down at him, slicing just deep enough to get his attention.

“Ah, fuck you!”

“What *cunts* are you talking about? Are there other prisoners here?”

His breathing increased as he tried not to scream, blood dripping down his ear to line along his jaw.

“Answer me,” I said, adding more pressure.

“Ah! Okay, yes, there’s girls in the basement.”

*Of course there had to be another floor.*

“Why? What are they here for?” I asked.

“We’re just keeping them here for a few days until they come to pick them up.”

“Until who comes to pick them up?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. The girls are Russian. That’s all I know.”

Satisfied with the info, I released his ear keeping the knife in one hand and raising the other for my pistol, pointing it at his head.

“You’re a gem, sir,” I said and pulled the trigger.

When the guard’s body went lax, I switched my gun for my knife again, ignoring that awful ringing in my ear, and gripped his limp hand. I’d seen this done a dozen times, noting that Darren enjoyed removing fingers from those that had offended him, but it wasn’t exactly something I was rushing to do. My stomach was already souring at the idea.

Taking a deep breath and attempting hard to ignore my gag reflex, I made quick work of the guard’s index finger, sawing as efficiently as I could until I felt the bone give and snapped the rest of it off.

“Oh my God,” Kayla groaned, gagging slightly as she turned away to cover her mouth.

Cutting the sleeve of his shirt off, I wrapped the now severed finger in the cloth. Only then did I finally exhale.

“Sorry. That wasn’t my favorite thing in the world either,” I said as I took the keys from the other guard to unlock the security gate.

After I shoved it upward, Kayla carefully stepped around the bodies, her bare feet avoiding the puddles of blood as her face scrunched in disgust. Ignoring her disdain, I pulled the M16s from the bodies, along with their vests, knives, and pistols and handed Kayla one of each.

“I need you to be able to kill some people today,” I said, holding the rifle out to her as she zipped up the oversized vest. “Think you can do that?”

She looked at the rifle for a moment, her face awash with trepidation and fear, but after a release of breath, she grabbed it and held it tight to her

chest. “Today, I can,” she affirmed.

I nodded with relief. “Good.”

Taking a tactical vest from one of the other guards, I quickly strapped myself up, placing the pistols, knives, phone, and finger in easily accessible pockets, and grabbed the keys for the door.

“What happened?” Kayla asked as I fastened my pistol to my side.

“The guy that manufactures our collars,” I said, tapping at the metal around my throat. “His niece was killed and he holds Matt responsible.”

Kayla furrowed her brows in confusion.

“You were the target, but they grabbed me by mistake. Darren negotiated for my release but not yours. But I’m not leaving you behind, so we’re going to make it out of here ourselves.”

She was silent for a moment, looking at me like I was crazy. “How?”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at her.

She asked a very good question. How – how was I going to pull this off without getting us killed? It immediately seemed so stupid and reckless. I could just let them take me wherever they were going to take me and lead Darren and Matt back to where Kayla was so they could rescue her. I could let the professionals handle this, could let them take the risk.

But what if I was wrong? What if they were planning on sending one of Kayla’s severed fingers to Matt right now to show the seriousness of the problem? What if they fucked her and sent a recording to him? Mutilated her? What if she was dead by the time we came back? What if we didn’t even come back?

I was trying to survive in a world where men were the horrific monsters we were warned about as teenage girls. After all the horrors I’d already endured, I would not leave Kayla to suffer any more potential what-ifs. Not if I was capable of being just as horrific as the rest of the monsters.

Fuck Darren.

I wouldn’t wait for him. I wouldn’t wait for anyone. I could do this. I would. And when I did, I would rub Darren’s fucking smug-ass face in it so deep he’d fucking drown in it.

*“You’re not ready.”*

*Bitch, watch this.*

“I need you to trust me and follow every order I give you. Don’t hesitate, just do it. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to attack, you don’t stop until I tell you to. Got it?”

She nodded solemnly.

“We’re getting out of here, Kayla. But we need to do a few things first.”

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I paced back and forth in front of the car, my blood boiling to a degree I didn't think it could reach as we hid from view near the rendezvous point. It had already taken far too much restraint to keep myself calm during that conversation with Tony, the urge to reach through the phone and rip his goddamn tongue out so I could strangle him with it was far too great. He made us wait hours before he finally answered the phone and then tried to call the whole thing a mistake. A simple misunderstanding.

His damage control game was weak.

He knew he fucked up. And he knew exactly who he had fucked up with. There would be severe consequences for this, consequences that I did not intend for him to survive. If he thought he could use that tech against me like this, then I had mistakenly invested in the wrong company. And I would rectify that with permanent remedies so that it never happened again.

"Where are they? They're late," Matt whined as he stood next to the SUV, looking out through the trees.

I looked at him with unabashed disdain. There really was no other way around it, no reason or explanation. This was his goddamn fault. If he had told me about Tony's threats, I could have prevented this. I could have handled it so that he didn't have to, but no, Matt thought he could resolve it on his own, and everything would work out.

But Matt lacked the influence I had, and he hated standing in my shadow, which was idiotic. My shadow alone was the best thing to have in your corner when you were at the negotiating table. But he wanted to be able to stand on both legs without me.

Of course, he could have also just listened to me in the first place and not made deals with people I explicitly told him not to. The *Lobos* would also pay for their stupidity since they knew they weren't to contract with anyone else but us. By the end of this week, the *Lobos* would be *extinto*.

"It's only been five minutes," Scott reminded Matt. "Don't lose your head yet."

If Matt said another fucking word, he just might.

But then five minutes turned into fifteen, and fifteen turned into twenty.

Pulling out my phone, I dialed Tony to tell him his man was late, but there was no answer. Trying not to crush my phone in a silent rage, I tried again, and again, and again, but there was still no answer.

"Fuck," I muttered before pocketing my phone.

There were only two reasons I could think of for the current change in events. Either someone got to Tony or Jaden did, and I had a pretty strong feeling it was the latter. And if that was the case, Jaden had better have a damn good reason for going against what I had already secured for her.

This place and the entire drive here for the next mile to and from was surrounded with my men, forty guns pointing in this direction and the road, ready to blow whoever the fuck was bringing my wife back to me to holy fucking hell should they try anything with her. But I intended to get them alive.

They would lead us to Tony, and we would get Kayla back for Matt, assuming I didn't kill Matt before then.

Assuming there was anything left of Kayla by then.

"Bring up a map of the surrounding area," I ordered. Something had gone wrong.

Scott pulled out an iPad from the car and placed it on the hood of the SUV, manipulating the screen to bring up the satellite image as we all gathered around. Adjusting the screen, I zoomed out just enough to get a better look at the surrounding areas, places that were within a few miles of our location.

"Matt, look closely. Tony can't be too far from us. Can you think of anything that might lead us to him?"

Matt reviewed the map, moving the screen this way and that, his gaze focused and hardened while I stood there trying not to kill him. It was after several frustrating minutes he finally spoke.

“I remember him mentioning once before about a storage facility he runs in Henderson. I imagine it would be well isolated with multiple buildings and a warehouse. Something like this,” Matt said as he pointed at a spot on the map.

Scott and I looked over the site Matt had pointed to, assessing the likelihood of him being correct before we abandoned our location.

“Seems like a good fit to me,” Scott said with a slight shrug. “Better than wasting our time here.”

I nodded in agreement. “We’ll leave five men behind here. Three along the road and two to wait here in case something comes up.”

Our plan decided, we packed up and began to head out.

“I swear to God, I am going to murder Tony for this,” Matt concluded as he headed for the car.

I shook my head at him. If Tony wasn’t answering his phone, then there was only one conclusion I could draw.

“Don’t get your hopes up. If he isn’t answering his phone, he’s probably already dead.”

Matt whipped his head around at my response, his brows knit with confusion. “What makes you say that?”

“Because he has Jaden. And she doesn’t handle captivity very well.”

After spending several minutes studying the map and the guard posts, we had a damn good idea of where we were, where we were going, and what we needed to do. First, we needed to find the gas line so I could cut it. Then we needed to find Tony before he fled the building so we could get that cloaking device, which meant the security room was our next stop so we could locate him and any other guards. Then we had to secure a ride out of here, so the garage was the next destination. And after that, we'd get those girls and get them the hell out of here before I blew the building.

Swiftly making our way through the hallway, I walked on tiptoes so as not to allow the sound of my block-heeled boots to echo through the hallway. They were noisy little shoes, but they would make a much bigger impact when they were kicking faces in.

Two guards marched past the intersecting hallway, causing me to shove us back against the wall of another hallway until they disappeared from sight. The adrenaline was running rampant through my veins now. I was surprised the alarms hadn't gone off yet, considering dead bodies replaced our positions in the room we were in. But I would thank my lucky stars later. I needed to keep focus, which was really difficult to do since I could already feel my heart ready to burst out of my chest, the damn thing inching to explode with every concern in the world for ourselves. How the fuck did Darren do this all the time without a single gray hair on his head? I was certain the stress alone would cause my hair to fall out.

Continuing our pursuit, we made our way down to the next hallway where the heating system was located, along with those two guards I saw



earlier. We just needed to follow that system until I could find the gas line. But first, I'd have to eliminate those guards without rousing the other ones.

"Kayla," I said, turning to her. "I need you to do something stupid."

She snorted quietly. "What else would you have me do?"

"I need you to be a distraction. Think you can get those guards to chase after you?"

She looked like I'd lost my damn mind. "Won't they just shoot me?"

I shook my head. "They want us alive and in one piece."

She took a deep breath and released, her shoulders hunching before she finally relaxed.

"Okay yeah, I can do it."

I nodded. "Good, leave your guns here."

Carefully placing her rifle and pistol on the ground, Kayla took another deep breath and stepped toward the corner with me right behind her. Peeking carefully around the corner, both guards had their backs to us – perfect.

It was now or never.

"Okay, go," I whispered.

Kayla stepped out into the hall with all the confidence I never realized she had. "Hey assholes," she called out to them.

The sound of heavy boots turning kept me vigilant.

"What are you doing out of your cell?" one of them yelled.

That was when Kayla took off running down the opposite end of the hallway.

"Hey! Wait! Get back here!" The sounds of their boots hitting the floor was all the signal I needed to let me know they were heading my way.

Two knives in each hand, I waited for them to run past the opening to the hallway I was down. Aiming quickly, I threw both knives, one after the other, one landing in the side of one guard's neck and the other in the back of the second guard's neck.

Both stumbled forward before collapsing to the floor, clutching their necks until they finally fell silent. Standing over their bodies, Kayla made it back to my side, her chest pumping up and down as she drew in breath.

"Goddamn, Jaden," she whispered quietly.

Ignoring her, I bent down to retrieve my knives, along with their own that were still attached to their belts and placed them in my vest.

“Come on, we need to find their gas line,” I said as I started following the heat system.

“What about our guns?” Kayla asked.

“Leave them. We won’t really be able to use them once I cut the line.”

“Why are you trying to blow up the building?” she asked as she moved quickly to keep up.

Rounding the corner, I finally found the copper gas line leading from the heating system.

“Because Darren will dissect the shit out of this place once he finds it, and I don’t want him to be able to find a damn thing.”

Trailing the line along the ceiling, I followed it until I found the shut off valves against the wall.

“What would he find that you don’t want him to?”

I turned to Kayla, my nerves starting to get the better of me knowing the risk I was about to put us in.

“Security footage ... and survivors,” I said gently. “I went against Darren when I decided to stay for you instead of leaving with them as he had negotiated. I don’t need any evidence contradicting what I tell him when he finds me later.”

“Oh, right,” she replied quietly. “Wait, what are you gonna tell him?”

I grimaced, really having no idea yet. “I won’t know until we get out of here.”

Turning back to the small copper line, I lifted my knee and kicked just under the shut off switch, my kick hard enough to easily break through the fragile line.

It didn’t take very long for the smell of gas to fill the air, the only signal I needed to know we couldn’t turn back now.

*“The girls are gone! Bryan, Max, and Greg are dead!”* a rough voice said over the walkie-talkie attached to our vests.

*Fuck, they’re on to us now.*

“Time to go!” I said, grabbing Kayla’s arm as we moved quickly back for the main hallway.

“What now?” she asked as we turned the corner and slowed our pace.

“Well, assuming I’m right, it should take about forty minutes for a building of this size to fill with gas, so we have a short window to find Tony before I blow this bitch myself.”

We were about to pass another hallway when the barrel of a gun suddenly stuck out right in front of me, causing me to instantly lift my foot and kick the center of the rifle out of the hands of the approaching guard. Retracting my foot, I snapped my leg out to kick him in the throat while reaching to my hip for my knife, pulling it out to stab him in the neck.

More blood splashed onto my shoulder, dripping down my bare arm as the guard slipped to the floor, clutching his throat. Kayla stood next to me as she stared down at his dead body.

“Jesus, Jaden. You’re wicked fucking fast.”

“For our sakes, you better hope so,” I said as I forced myself to catch my breath, grabbing the guard’s knife and handing it to Kayla.

Continuing down the line, we kept tight to the wall until we finally made it down the hall where the security room was located. If we could get there, I had a much better shot at finding Tony and those girls in the basement.

“Hey, you there! Stop right there!” a voice yelled from not too far behind us.

It was enough to make me immediately grab my knife, turn, and throw it as hard as I could at him. It landed deep into his shoulder instead of his jugular as I’d hoped for, making me panic slightly as I rushed toward him. Running at full speed, I jumped into a flying sidekick, my foot landing straight into his throat.

His back hit the ground as I landed on my feet, my body moving quickly to reach down to pull the knife from his shoulder and slash his throat with it. Noting the sounds of more boots headed our way, I returned to Kayla as quickly as I could.

“We need to hide!” I whisper-shouted to her.

Grabbing the handle of a random door, Kayla pulled it open to reveal a supply closet. Tucking ourselves inside, we closed the door behind us and kept as still and silent as possible as the sounds of heavy boots raced past the door.

“Fuck! They killed Kenny!” a voice could be heard through the door.

“Find them!”

As the sounds of boots grew quieter, we both released the breath we’d been holding and let out a quiet chuckle.

“I don’t suppose we could just stay in here, could we?” Kayla asked sarcastically.

I smirked at her. "We've made it this far."

She released a deep breath in response, trying to shake the fear from her bones. I tried to follow suit, catching my breath while trying to bring my heart rate down. The idea of hiding in this closet until we were rescued sounded like a comforting idea, but I knew that wasn't possible.

"I don't know how you handled this in Rome. I can barely stop myself from shaking."

I thought about that for a moment, but it wasn't a very good method of getting my nerves under control. Everything I'd done had been reactionary, instantaneous, and only lasted the span of a few minutes.

"Didn't have much of a choice then," I replied.

"Fuck, maybe you *should* have left me behind."

I almost slapped her.

"Fuck that," I nearly growled. "We leave together or not at all."

"Goddamn your stubbornness, Jaden," Kayla retorted.

I smiled at her. "It's part of my charm. Now shh."

Placing my ear against the door, I listened intently for any noise that might be on the other side. When I felt there was enough silence behind the door, I decided it was time to leave.

"You ready?" I asked Kayla, hoping she'd calmed down enough to move again.

All she gave me was a quick desperate nod.

"Shoulders back, bitch. Let's go," I said, giving her shoulder a good tap before I carefully opened the door.

Quickly making our way back down the hallway, we turned the corner to come dead center in front of another fucking guard.

"Stop! Put your hands in the air! Both of you, now!"

"Goddamn it," I muttered to myself.

It was one guard, pointing a pistol at us. He was ten feet away from the door I was sure was the security room.

Following his orders, I held my hands up and waited for him to come closer. He looked slightly nervous as he walked toward us, his free hand moving for a zip tie in his cargo pocket.

"Both hands out in front," he ordered. He was just within reach.

Placing my hands out, I waited for him to lower his gun since there was no way he could restrain both of us with one hand and keep the gun on us. The second he lowered it, my hands shot out to grip the top of it, moving

quickly to the left to pull my knife from my hip to slash his throat while Kayla took the initiative to kick him in the side of the knee, her bare foot doing just enough damage to bring him down. Blood splattered across my face as both his knees hit the floor, his hands clutching his throat as he went down.

“Nice kick,” I told Kayla, but that was all I got out before I was immediately tackled to the floor, knocking the knife from my hand.

How the fuck did I not hear the boots coming my way?

Fighting to regain the oxygen that had been knocked from my lungs, I wrestled with the guard on top of me, all the while battling the annoying curtain of red hair that now covered my face. The tight grip of my dress around my hips made it more difficult than I expected as I struggled to wrap my legs around his waist, finally able to lock my ankles tight to prevent him from getting anymore ground.

“Jaden!” screamed Kayla as she immediately kicked the guard in the back of the head. It was enough to disorientate him so I could shove my palm deep into his nose, causing his eyes to water and distract him further. It allowed me to then reach for the set of keys I still had in my pocket and toss them to Kayla.

“Get the door open! Go!” I shouted at her as I reached back for the third knife in my vest.

Lifting it up, the guard quickly found his bearings and grabbed my wrist midair, holding it far too tightly. Ramming my forehead into his already busted nose, blood burst from it splattering with the last guard’s blood, giving me the chance to grab the knife from my trapped hand with the other hand and plunging it deep into his neck.

Blood spilled all over my chest, sliding down my leather dress as the guard’s body became limp right on top of me. Groaning, I gathered as much strength as I could to shove his body off me, leaping from the floor toward the door Kayla was anxiously holding open for me.

She slammed it behind me, locking it, and turning to face me, her eyes bulging as she took in all the blood.

“It’s not mine,” I said as I attempted to catch my breath before turning my attention to the multiple monitors in front of us.

“Jesus, Jaden. You look ...”

I turned back to her, suddenly concerned. “What?” I asked as I pushed some of my blood-soaked hair from my face.

She shook her head and turned her attention to the monitors. “Never mind. Let’s just find Tony.”

I didn’t have time to concern myself with my appearance right now. I knew I had to look like something out of a damn 90s slasher movie, but after everything I’d been through, wearing blood didn’t scare me anymore. I was already tainted with it.

Focusing on the screens, I saw about ten security videos currently playing, and my eyes studied every guard I could find. There were only a few guards left from what I could find. Two in the garage, a few still patrolling the halls in search of us, and only one in the basement. Rage filled my veins as I watched at least seven young girls huddle in the corner of a cell similar to the one they had me and Kayla in. Now we just had to locate Tony.

“Do you see him anywhere?” I asked Kayla, pushing my irritating hair out of my face once again. Glancing around the desk, I noticed a loose rubber band sticking out of a drawer. Snagging it, I pulled my hair back into a low ponytail, securing it tightly. Having your hair in your face while you were fighting for your life was not exactly ideal. I then took one of my knives and started quickly cutting from the hem of my dress up the side seams until I reached my hips.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kayla asked.

“Damn thing is too restrictive,” I answered after putting my knife away.

“Well now you just look like a modern ginger version of Xena.”

I turned to her with a smirk. “And you look like Gabrielle had too much to drink at a frat party.”

“Touché.”

Turning our attention back to the monitors, we focused on finding Tony.

“I doubt there’s a camera in his office,” Kayla commented.

“Well, he’s gotta be hiding here somewhere. If he leaves, I’m assuming he takes that cloaking device with him, which reveals our location. I don’t think he wants that. Plus, we’re still bargaining chips.”

“He could leave the device with someone else,” Kayla added.

“You’re right, but for our sake, you better hope not.”

After spending too many precious minutes formulating our exit strategy based on the camera display, we were ready to move out. We could see where the vans were located just outside the garage and the location of the keys that hung on the wall, so we didn’t have to waste any time searching

for shit. Rummaging through the supply cabinet they had in the room, I was fortunate enough to find a crowbar in the corner of the bottom shelf.

“Wait, Jaden, look!” Kayla shouted just as I was about to swing into the screens. “Is that him?”

Getting a closer look, relief was a breath of fresh air as I realized Tony was actually walking in our direction. Rather quickly too.

“That’s him,” I confirmed. I then stepped back and slammed the crowbar into the screens, hopefully destroying their only eyes to the security system.

“Jesus, Rambo,” Kayla chided.

“Sorry, did you want a turn?” I asked with a smirk, extending the crowbar to her.

“Nah, I think you got it.”

“Okay then, let’s go.”

Moving quickly from the room, we made our way down the hallway, my mobility noticeably better from the modifications of my dress. Adrenaline raced through my system anew as we hurried along until we turned the corner, stopping dead in our tracks as we came face to face with Tony.

Standing about ten meters away, Tony’s face contorted in absolute shock and fear as he turned to run. Grabbing my knives, I flung both of them through the air, each one striking the back of Tony’s thighs.

He screamed as he crashed to the floor, his legs completely useless to him now as he actually attempted to crawl away from us.

Realizing that no one had announced the gas line had been cut, I knew that meant Tony didn’t know either. Gripping the pistol that I kept safely at the side of my vest, I pulled it out and aimed at him.

“Hand it over,” I ordered.

He groaned as he looked up at me. “Hand what over?”

I smashed the butt of my gun across his face, causing him to cry out. “Do not waste my time. Hand it over or I will kill you and take it anyway.”

I wanted to make sure he at least had it before I killed the stupid fucker.

“I-I I don’t have it,” he stuttered.

“What the hell do you mean you don’t have it?” Kayla growled down at him.

“I-I gave it to my security director.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

“I-I I don’t know.”

My patience thinning by the second, I placed my foot on the back of his leg right where my knife was still sticking out, eliciting a holy hell of screams.

“Where!” I shouted over him.

“The garage! The garage!” he screamed as he tried to crawl away from me. “You fucking bitch! I thought we had an understanding!”

Releasing his leg, I bent down to become eye level with him.

“Tony,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “You’re a very stupid man if you thought Darren was going to let you live after this.” My tone was almost sympathetic. Almost. “Now, I can hand you over to him when he eventually gets here, in which case he’ll tear you apart piece by piece. It’ll be slow and excruciating.” Tony started to visibly shake as the weight of his eventual demise fell onto his shoulders. “Or ... you can tell me where your headquarters is, and I will kill you quickly. Consider it a mercy.”

Tony closed his eyes and lowered his head in defeat. I knew that look on his face all too well. I’d worn it so many times it almost felt like it was a part of me now. But for the first time in a long time, I was the one standing over my enemy, my victory just a breath away, the rush unlike anything I’d ever felt before – a feeling far too dangerous for me.

“Santa Barbara,” Tony finally murmured. “It’s in Santa Barbara. You’ll find a business card in my wallet.”

Nodding at Kayla, she reached into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. Rummaging through it quickly, she pulled out a black business card and studied it. “Got it,” she said as she pocketed his entire wallet in her vest.

That was all we needed.

“It’s been real, Tony,” I said and sliced my knife across his throat.

Ignoring the choking noises as blood splashed onto my shoes, I pulled the guard’s phone from my pocket to check for the garage and grimaced at the black screen. “See, I told you I’d hit the damn button,” I gritted as I begrudgingly pulled the guard’s wrapped finger out of my pocket. I’d changed the settings so the screen would never lock, but I knew accidentally hitting the side button would happen at some point.

Kayla gagged as I used the finger to unlock the screen, so I wrapped it back up quickly hiding it away in my pocket again. Looking over the blueprint on the screen, I confirmed the location of garage and basement,



realizing it wasn't too far from where we were. But we needed to get those girls out of the basement quickly before the building finished filling with gas.

"Come on, let's head to the basement first," I said.

Kayla nodded as she took a deep breath and stepped in line with me.

Making our way through the hall, we found the steps that led to the basement, our feet carefully moving down the stairs, both knives in hand ready to strike. Getting to the bottom of the steps, there was a single door with a small window at the top for viewing. As carefully as I could, I peeked through the corner of the window to see the back of one guard strolling down the hall in front of what looked like cell bars.

Perfect.

*"Those bitches destroyed the surveillance system! Fucking find them!"* came a voice over the walkie-talkie attached to my vest. Good to know their eyes were gone.

"Kayla, you ready to be a distraction again?"

She smirked at me. "Pretty sure I'm a pro now."

"Get him to follow you out here."

Nodding, she took a deep breath before grabbing the door handle, yanking the door open.

"Hey, ass clown," she called to the guard as she stepped in the doorway.

"Fucking bitch! I've got the blonde!" the guard shouted into his walkie-talkie. It didn't matter. There were only a few guards left anyway.

"Presumptuous, aren't we?" Kayla taunted and then turned to run.

Keeping out of sight, I waited for the guard to come through the doorway, his boots echoing through the hall as he chased after Kayla. She made it up just a few steps before he caught up to her, not even bothering to notice me.

Launching forward with one knife in hand, I landed on his back, grabbed the front of his forehead and sliced my knife across his throat, splashing more blood onto my hand and forearm. I jumped off him just before he stumbled to the ground, blood spilling all over his uniform and down to the floor. I didn't wait for him to die before I started rummaging through his pocket for the keys to the cells.

Leaving the guard to his fate, I took the keys from his pocket and ran back into the hallway, the group of girls gathering at the front of the cell bars, their eyes wide with fear and hope.

“Who are you?” one of them asked, her Russian accent thick as she regarded us both.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said as I fiddled with the keys to find the one that would unlock the cell. “You’re going to forget my face once we get out of here.”

She looked confused for a second before she dropped the conversation. She was being rescued. It didn’t matter who her rescuer was.

Finally finding the right key, I pulled the cell door open, the girls moving quickly to free themselves as they gathered around us.

“What now?” one of them asked.

As I looked at their faces, my heart broke at how young they all obviously were. They were teenagers, all of them, their eyes clinging to me as their savior, hopeful of a better future that might relieve them of their suffering.

“You become strong,” I told them seriously, the weight of my words becoming the encouragement they needed. “You follow me, and you do everything I tell you. If you can do that, we will get you out of here.”

The first girl to speak came forward in front of everyone, likely the leader of the group, turned and addressed the girls, speaking to them in Russian. They all listened to her, their heads nodding in solidarity before she turned back to me.

“We go,” she said affirmatively.

I nodded at her. “Okay, let’s go.”

Leading the girls out of the hallway and into the stairs, I stopped to remove the hunting knife from the dead guard still lying on the stairs, his blood dripping down the steps to coat the floor below him. A collection of gasps and shrieks echoed behind me as the girls caught sight of their jailor. Disregarding their alarm, I handed the knife to the leader of their group.

“You need to be able to protect them,” I said as she took the knife, gripping it tightly in her small hand. She gave me a small serious nod in acknowledgment.

“Come on!” I called and led them up the stairs, back into the hallway, and headed straight for the garage. The smell of gas was now saturating the air, telling me we really needed to get the fuck out of here.

The girls moved quickly, keeping up and staying vigilant as we navigated through the halls, stopping at the last door that would lead into the garage.

“There should be three guards inside,” I told the girls. “We will have to fight them.”

They all nodded in unison.

“No guns,” I said with as much authority I could muster. If they happened to stumble across one in there, I didn’t need them missing and hitting someone else or blowing the whole building prematurely. “They won’t shoot you either. They want you alive.”

They nodded again as they understood.

“You’re a team now. Work as one. Show no fear. And don’t forget, we outnumber them,” I said with a wink.

When I could tell they were prepared, I turned to Kayla. “I’ll try to distract the guards as best as I can, but you’ll probably have to handle at least one. Get them to a car furthest away from the garage and far away from the gas. When you’re clear, I’ll cause an explosion.”

“From a safe distance,” she asserted, gripping my arm like I was on a suicide mission.

“Duh,” I said with a smirk. “No worries.”

When she was satisfied, she released my arm, allowing me to turn my attention back to the girls.

“Ready?”

Upon their nods, I opened the door wide, leaving it open enough to allow the gas to begin filling the room. Kayla led the girls straight for the several parked vans just outside the open garage doors.

“What the fuck do you bitches think you’re doing?” one of the guards shouted as we garnered their attention.

“Go!” I shouted at the girls as they immediately stopped in their tracks.

“Come on!” Kayla called as she led them forward.

One of the guards was already running after them, causing me to raise my arm and toss one of my knives right into the side of his throat. He went down instantly.

Leaving the door wide open, I marched toward the remaining two guards, replacing my lost knife with another from my vest, two knives in each hand, and demanded their attention. “Which one of you fucks is the security director?”

One of the guards immediately lifted his gun to aim it at me, but the guard standing in front of him held out his hand. “No, don’t. We need them alive. Handle the others. I’ve got this one.” Of course he was the largest one

of them with the demeanor of a man who didn't like to be challenged. "I've been hoping to get a piece of you all day," he said to me, his eyes moving up and down my blood-stained body.

"I'm flattered."

Reaching behind his back, he pulled out an incredibly sharp looking serrated machete, the light glinting off the shiny metal, promising a world of pain with a simple kiss. My entire demeanor changed in an instant.

"Ah, shit," I muttered to myself.

I didn't get much of a chance to strategize after that as he immediately began swinging the machete at my face. Ducking and dodging at every angle, my heart was bursting from my chest, knowing how close I was to death with every brutal swing of his arm. He was double my size, well-muscled, and fast with that blade.

After a few seconds of studying his fight pattern, I predicted a moment he would raise his arm, dropping it at just the right moment for me to dodge and slash my knife against the back of his thigh. He cried out from the slice, swinging his machete back in my direction as he stumbled toward me, nearly missing my throat.

"I'm gonna chop you into little fucking pieces and feed you to the coyotes."

*So much for wanting to keep me alive. Fuck.*

Swinging as aggressively as before, I ducked forward under his arm and managed to slice the back of his knee but at the cost of enduring a nice deep cut on the top of my shoulder during my exit move. The cut stung something fierce from the serrated steel, blood now dripping down my back and arm to cake over my skin.

That earned me a little smirk of satisfaction from the guard, even as he started to limp even more than before, his chest heaving from exertion. I was just about to re-engage when the loud painful shouts of a man drew my attention. Glancing to my left, the girls and Kayla had the guard on his back and were currently kicking the shit out of him. Kayla then came forward with her knife.

But the slight distraction was enough for the security director to lift his long leg and kick me in the shoulder, the force of it shocking my system and causing me to turn my back to him. He took the opportunity to grab my ponytail, wrap it around his hand and yank my head back.

“What a pretty leash you’ve got here,” he snickered through gritted teeth as he continued to pull, tugging my body closer as I fought against it.

*Fuck this.*

Reaching back with my knife, I cut the strands of my own hair, the pain of the tug instantly gone, replaced with a lesser weight between my shoulder blades. The guard shrieked as the blade also cut deep into his hand, dropping the heavy locks of my long hair to the floor in a wispy pile of red strings.

*Finally. The haircut I’ve been begging Darren for.*

Releasing a quick breath of relief and keeping myself light on my feet, I waited for the guard to find his bearings, his hand covered in blood, but as he looked up at me, gritting his teeth and his eyes blazing with aggression.

“That piece good enough for you?” I asked, pointing at my hair with my knife.

“You’re a dead bitch,” he declared.

“Come and prove it then,” I taunted.

The guard then swung so fast across my middle I almost missed it, the whoosh of the blade cutting through the air and giving me minimal time to narrowly step out of the way, the Kevlar vest thankfully taking the full force of the blade. Coming in close, he swung across at my head, to which I dodged and lunged forward quickly to ram my knife right under his chin.

Dropping the machete with a clank to the floor, the guard dropped to his knees before rolling onto his back as blood dribbled down his chest. Glancing to my left, I could see the guard the girls had attacked was still lying on the floor, unmoving, while the rest of the girls searched the walls for the keys to the van.

Bending down to the dead security director, I searched through his Kevlar vest until I found the little black device that would save our asses. Clutching it tightly, I commandeered the machete and made my way over to the white van outside as the girls all piled in and someone started the engine.

It was time to make a really tough decision.

“Jaden, come on! Let’s get out of here,” Kayla said as she stood at the open doors of the van. The sun was shining in her dirty blond hair, her body still covered in blood, bruises, and dirt. She’d been an amazing companion throughout this whole thing, strong, smart, and plenty capable, a true friend, a friend I would never forget.

“What the hell happened to your hair?” she asked as I stopped in front of her.

“Listen to me, Kayla,” I said carefully. “Take the device, stay hidden and get the fuck out of dodge. Take the cash from Tony’s wallet and get as far as you can.”

Her eyes were as big as saucers as she looked at me like I was crazy. “Wait, what? No. No, I’m not leaving you. You’re coming with us.” Panic was already setting in her face as her eyes pleaded with me to just be kidding.

Pulling my engagement ring from my hand, I grabbed her wrist and placed it in her palm. “Pawn the ring and fly out of the country. Find Jason in Germany, give him all the info and where to find the headquarters for the collars. Maybe he can retrace the signal and find me.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Wait, Jason? Your boyfriend? How do you know where he is? Did you find him?”

I smiled at her with so much pride and hope, I could feel it warming my soul. “He found me, Kayla. In Rome. He actually found me. He’s working with another network to try to bring Darren down, but he can’t do it alone. He needs help, someone from on the inside. I need that person to be you.”

She was silent for a moment, battling with herself over what she knew she had to do. The very thing I swore I wouldn’t do: leave me behind.

“But I can’t just leave you. We leave together or not at all remember? Why can’t you just come with me? We can find Jason together.”

I shook my head. I wished it were that easy, but it just wasn’t. “If I leave, I’ll be running for the rest of my life. I have to finish this.”

Kayla’s eyes began to water before she blinked and sent them straight down her face.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Yes, you can,” I said firmly. “I will tell them you’re dead so they won’t look for you. You disappear, Kayla. You find Jason. And then *you* become my savior. Do you understand? I need you to be strong. For both of us.”

More tears spilled down her pretty face, my chest filling with a heavy ache from the pain of having to be without her in this. She was someone I could always look forward to seeing, the one person I could count on to distract me from the horrors of my life, but I couldn’t keep her locked up in this if there was a chance I could set her free.

“Okay,” she finally muttered. “I’ll do it, but you need to know this is the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done.”

I nodded in understanding. She had no idea.

Taking out the guard’s phone, I plugged Jason’s number into the phone under a fake name and gave the phone to Kayla. “I put Jason’s number in there under J. King. Find a pen when you can, write it on that business card and destroy the phone. Call the number from a prepaid phone when you can so it’s safe. If he doesn’t believe who you are, tell him that his cousin is the reason he can bend his thumb all the way backward.”

Nodding her head, she took the phone and placed it in the pocket of her vest. “I’ll memorize it.”

“We go! We go now!” came the voice of one of the girls from inside the van.

Alarm struck my heart as I peered around the corner to find several guards with guns coming down a fire escape from the side of the building. I neglected to discover there was a fucking second floor.

*Fuck!*

“Go! I’ll hold them off!” I yelled as I shoved Kayla into the back of the van, already shutting the doors.

“No! Wait! No!” Kayla shouted as I slammed the door shut in her face and pounded on the door to send them off.

Turning away from Kayla’s screaming face through the van windows, I ignored her shouts and hardened myself for what I needed to do. God, I hoped she was able to get out, that she could find Jason, and maybe finally get back to her life. Where she could be free.

Clutching the machete in one hand and my pistol in the other, I crouched low against one of the several private sheds that lined the building, waiting for my opportunity to strike.

It dawned on me that for the first time in a very long time, I was actually alone. I had absolutely no backup, no one to assist me, no one to shove me to the ground while they destroyed my assailants with bullets and fury. I had to handle this one completely on my own.

Panic struck me as the guards immediately began firing at the back of the van as they swiftly moved toward it. Aiming my gun from the safety of the sheds, I fired at the group of guards without even thinking, my bullets hitting their legs and arms, but not killing any of them before they turned and fired back.

Ducking back behind the shed, I rolled into the bushes, the sound of the gunfire masking my movements until I made it to another shed. Trying to calm my racing heart and panicked breathing, I exhaled a deep quiet breath, listening as heavy boot-steps pounded against the pavement, coming my way, the pained shouts of the guards I had hit filling the air. Holding up the machete and angling it very carefully, I could see maybe four or five guards moving in my direction, the barrels of their rifles pointed out directly in front of them. I needed to be quick here.

Keeping tight to the side of the shed, I waited for the barrel of the first guard to come into my vision before I struck down with my machete over his arms and shot him in the head with my pistol, dropping him instantly. Return gunfire in my direction was the immediate response from the other guards, causing me to duck down and move back into the bushes next to the sheds and hit the ground.

Adrenaline spiking all over again, I rolled back up to hide behind a large tree, desperately catching my breath as quietly as I could. But it wasn't quiet enough as the butt of a gun slammed into the side of my head, sending me straight to the ground, the world spinning around me. Fighting to get my body to work, I felt my wrist grabbed in a tight grip before my body was pulled forward, dragging me away.

Shaking off my disorientation and the pain now pulsing in my head, I twisted my hand around the wrist of the guard, pulled my entire body around to bring my legs up and kicked the guard in the back of both his knees while simultaneously pulling him down by his wrist. He went down faster than I anticipated, but it was enough time to bring my legs in front of his head and torso to trap him in an arm bar. Grabbing the pistol at his hip with my free hand, I fired it at the guard heading my way, dropping him quickly before firing into the face of the guard still trapped in my arm bar.

*Two left.*

Moving quickly from the ground, I grabbed the machete that was still in reach on the ground when a sharp sound struck the air and a piercing pain ripped through the flesh of my arm. Forcing myself away from the open space, I slammed into the side of the shed, holding back my cries as blood seeped from the wound and down my arm. It wasn't as deep as it felt, but it would definitely need stitches.

Quickly ripping off a strip of my already torn dress, I bundled up the fabric and pulled the rubber band from my hair, pressing the leather fabric



against the bullet wound and securing it with the rubber band. It took all the strength I had not to cry out from the white-hot pain searing into my arm from the pressure as nausea clutched my stomach, but I had to stop the bleeding somehow.

Jesus, I'd almost been shot.

Regaining my composure and fighting my hardest to ignore the burning pain of my arm, I gripped the pistol in one hand and the machete in the other, willing myself to keep my shit together. Moving quietly around the shed, I came up behind the guard and slammed the machete down on the top of his head, foregoing the pistol to maintain my silence. The crunch of his skull under the weight of the blade twisted my stomach, but relief was my remedy as I watched another body drop to the ground.

*One left.*

Rapid gunfire in my direction had me dropping to the ground, hiding against the shed as pieces of wood splintered all around me. Grabbing the body of the nearest dead guard, I gripped his rifle, pressed it against my shoulder, waited for the bullets to stop, and returned fire, hoping the bullets hit something important.

With every shot I made, my entire upper body screamed from the force of the rifle as it pressed into my shoulder, but I didn't stop firing. Spraying bullets in every direction, I finally saw the guard huddled between two of the spare vans as he moved to shield himself. Sacrificing my cover, I continued to fire, moving quickly through the open space until I made it to the next closest shed about ten feet away.

Lying low to the ground, halfway into the ditch, I waited for the guard to move again, and the second he did, I fired until his body hit the ground and he stopped moving. Attempting to catch my breath and slow my heart rate, I retrieved the machete, placing it through the loops of my vest at the sides, and raised my rifle as I made my way over to the guard to make sure he was dead.

And just when I thought everything was all over, ten more guards suddenly appeared in the open garage, guns at the ready. Seeking cover behind the van, panic began to fill my chest at the realization that I might just lose this one. I could already feel my body running on fumes, my energy level so close to depletion with the adrenaline being the only thing keeping me going.

"Come out with your hands up!" someone shouted.

Looking down at the dead guard, a surprising spout of hope hit me as a small smile came to my lips.

A belt of grenades was strapped to his chest. How I managed not to hit one of those was a question for the divine.

Reaching down, I pulled one from the belt and gripped it tightly in my hand, my destructive salvation.

“Come out now!” another shouted.

*Fuck, it was now or never.*

Clutching my rifle, I quickly turned and fired an onslaught of bullets into the garage, keeping them distracted long enough for me to stop, pull the pin from the grenade, and chuck it as hard as I could into the garage. Ducking behind the van, it only took maybe three seconds before the boom of a lifetime shattered the air and the entire building exploded in a fiery rage. The van provided some initial cover, but the blast was still enough to knock me from my haunches and onto the ground.

The familiar sound of ringing deafened my ears again, disorientation of such proportion keeping me from moving even an inch without the world spinning. Taking several deep breaths, I forced myself to focus on a single object in the distance before my vision finally cleared and my legs could hold my weight.

Clutching the side of the van for stability, I turned to see the remains of the building, crouching to make sure I wouldn't get hit with any debris before ducking around the van to see if any guards had survived. But considering the entire building was in flames, there wasn't much hope for them. Slinging the rifle around my back, gripping the machete in one hand and the dead guard's pistol from his hip, I stood and walked around the van to witness my destruction.

And what an incredible sight it was to witness the result of my efforts and comprehend what I had just done. What Darren had told me would never be enough. Yet here I was, standing in the proof that contradicted his doubts of me. A moment that deserved my recognition.

But my moment was quickly ruined as about ten black SUVs pulled up behind me, several men exiting the vehicles, with only one standing out from the rest of them.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was like a dream from the deepest, darkest depths of my subconscious, something I never thought to be conceivable. But there it was right in front of me.

Jaden was standing in front of a demolished burning building, her body covered from head to toe in blood and dirt, her black leather dress torn and weathered, her hair in short jagged shambles while she carried a bloody machete in one hand, a pistol in the other, and an M16 strapped to her back, dead bodies scattered all around her like trophies from a hunt.

The image burned itself into the back of my mind like an imprint I'd never be able to blink away. She was an angel of death, a goddess of war, and I couldn't take my fucking eyes off her.

It wasn't just her stilled presence or that vibrant energy torching the air around her that made my own bones burn from the inside out. It was the look on her face. A hardened crimson mask of steel and fury that could only be matched by the fire in her eyes as her gaze pierced through me, creating the most indescribable feeling. The stark feeling of being wrong. Of being so incredibly wrong on so many levels it hit me like a ton of bricks nearly bringing me to my knees.

My creation, my perfect vision, my wife was more than just ready. She didn't even fucking need me.

I didn't know how many men she killed or if she was the reason the building had exploded. All I knew was that among the dead, the destruction, and the flames, she was the one still standing. And she wanted me to know that.

*Message received, my little Queen.*

Finding my feet, they carried me to where she stood, her eyes following my every move like I might reach out and attack her. God, even in this battle-hardened state, she was still the most beautiful creature I'd ever laid eyes on.

"Jaden," I said, attempting to end whatever trance she suddenly had over me.

Relaxing her shoulders, she released a heavy breath and found her voice.

"About time," she stated. "I need a fucking shower."

Her words didn't even surprise me. She was a warrior now, born from fire and blood, a completely new animal. One I wasn't sure if I even still knew.

Walking past me, she headed for the car while the thirty-five men I'd brought with me surrounded the building, hunting for any survivors or threats. I knew in my gut there would be none.

Forgetting that Matt had followed me out of the car, he stopped in front of Jaden, desperation all over his face.

"Where's Kayla?" he asked.

Jaden didn't say a word. Just stared at him until the anger reappeared all over her pretty face. And then she dropped the weapons in her hands and punched him right in the mouth.

Stunned by her sudden attack, Jaden managed to get a few more good hits on Matt, knocking his ass to the ground before I finally found my senses and pulled her off him.

"She's dead, you fuck!" she shouted at him as she struggled against me. Regret instantly exploded in my chest. Those were the last words I expected to hear. "They fucking killed her because of you!"

Matt's eyes went wide as his hands dropped to his side, completely lifeless.

"How do you know?" I asked as I held her tight, attempting to calm her down.

She stopped struggling for a moment before she shook her head and gritted her teeth. "Tony told me everything," she said as she seethed down at Matt. "They took her away into another room, and she screamed for what seemed like hours. When I finally broke out of the holding unit, there was nothing left in the room but pools of blood."

Suddenly, an ache I hadn't felt in a very long time splintered for my wife. I knew she considered Kayla a friend even though she shouldn't have. Jaden would have prided herself on saving her, and now she would have to live with her misperceived failure. It wasn't her fault, though. Not in the slightest.

Keeping my arms around her, I gave her a gentle squeeze.

"I'm sorry, Jaden," I said softly. "But we need to go."

She was likely in a very fragile state at the moment, and by fragile, I meant violently fragile.

Sighing, she nodded and allowed me to guide her away from Matt. Grabbing the rifle still at her back, I gently lifted it over her head and left it on the ground with the rest of her discarded weapons, pulling her into my arms so I could bury my nose into her mangy hair, taking comfort in the fact that she was still alive and in one piece. Relief like I had never known flooded my entire being as her little hands gripped my biceps, her stiff body growing lax against my chest. She must be exhausted.

Lifting her up, I carried her back to the car, leaving Matt to process his loss in private for a moment.

When we got to the car, I set her down in the back seat and turned her to me to look her over, carefully pulling off the oversized Kevlar vest she'd clearly stolen, and meticulously assessing any wounds she might have.

"How much of this blood is your own?" I asked, noticing the makeshift blood-soaked bandage over her upper arm. Fighting back the panic at knowing someone had hurt her, I found some relief knowing it at least wasn't broken, grateful for her trained reflexes. I had a feeling that injury would be deep enough to require stitches, but other than some serious bruising, a bad bump at her temple, and a few deep cuts and scrapes, Jaden appeared intact. At least on the outside. I had no idea what was going on inside her head right now, but I needed to crack it before it got too wild in there.

"Not very much," she answered, her voice calm and steady. "A bullet grazed my right arm, and the blade of that machete sliced my upper shoulder. I took a good hit to the head from the butt of that rifle that left me disoriented for a second, but I don't think I have a concussion. I'm sure I'll be fine."

A bullet had grazed her arm. Fuck, someone had shot at her, my rage quickly eating up my gut all over again.

Pulling back the dirty matted hair along her hairline, I got a closer look at the massive red bruised bump growing at her temple. Running my hands along the ends of her hair, concern flourished at the ragged mutilated ends of her beautiful red locks.

“What happened to your hair?” I asked gently.

Jaden released a deep breath, her eyelids beginning to droop as she lowered her gaze.

“I’m very tired,” she answered softly.

I nodded in understanding. With all the adrenaline she probably went through, she was likely about to crash from exhaustion.

“We’ll have Sid take a look at you.”

She only nodded before leaning back against the seat and closing her eyes. I was just about to buckle her in when Scott stopped me.

“There’s literally nothing left,” he said. “Everyone is dead and no sign of Tony.”

“That’s because Tony’s dead too,” Jaden said from inside the car, her eyes remaining closed, but her breathing thankfully even.

Both Scott and I turned to her, knowing full well she was the one responsible. I hoped it was satisfactory for her because I would have made it last for weeks.

“We’ll do a quick sweep through, discover what we can, but it doesn’t look like there’s much left to salvage,” Scott replied.

I nodded in agreement. “Update me when you can.”

Scott returned the nod as I glanced over at Matt. “See that Matt gets home. I also want Sid in the air in five minutes,” I ordered and stepped into the car with Jaden.

She fell asleep on our way back to the hotel, her small body nudged tightly against mine, the only comfort I received was listening to her slow, easy breathing and knowing her body had not completely given out. She would need lots of rest after this, and I would make sure she got it, whether she wanted it or not.

Using the private back entrance, I carried Jaden from the car and into the private elevator back up to the suite. With the light weight of her in my arms again, I was grateful she hadn’t been taken far, close enough where we could still find her. I was so ready to massacre everyone and everything in sight, my vision red from the fury emanating in my veins, but after the explosion, all I felt, for the first time in a long time, was fear. That

paralyzing ice-cold feeling that shoots through your spine, rips through your gut, and hardens in your chest; a debilitating feeling I hadn't known since I was a child. And I had no intention of experiencing it ever again.

Laying Jaden down onto the bed, I gently cut away her torn clothes and cleaned off her face with a warm washcloth, wiping away the dirt and blood encased on her skin. She was fucking bruised everywhere all the way down to her busted knuckles, her pale skin not hiding a damn thing from me as I explored the costs of her victory.

But the lack of a large sparkling diamond on her ring finger quickly caught my attention, my anger resurfacing again at the loss of the symbolic mementos of our marriage. I knew I should have put a tracker in the damn thing, but I never thought anyone would ever get the chance to steal from her, considering she was never alone. I decided I would let it simmer in the back of my mind, an explanation I'd get later. Tony had assured me her well-being. The fucker is lucky he's dead.

Even as I washed away the dark remnants of her combat, the hardened look on Jaden's beautiful face still remained. I longed to see it soften and relax so that she would know she was safe again. That she could breathe again.

Moving down her arms, I cleaned and dressed her wounds. Not bothering to wait for Sid to be flown in, I stitched and dressed the bullet graze on her arm myself. It wouldn't be the first time I stitched her up, and I hated that it probably wouldn't be the last. But that was the reality of our lives now, the reality of my world.

She didn't even stir as I stitched her up, her energy level obviously depleted. I hadn't slept since she was taken, foregoing what little sleep I get in the first place, my blood too hot and my rage too great to let a moment slip by when I wasn't actively trying to find her.

We were already headed in the direction of the storage facility when Jaden's mark finally started to beep on my phone again, confirming just where we thought she was. And as soon as we entered the gates, the building blew up along with whatever hopes I had of rescuing her. I didn't know what I'd find once we got through all the rubble and destruction, the rage in my veins mixing with the panic in my heart already clouding my judgment.

But then there she was, standing amongst the fiery chaos like a goddamn phoenix rising among the ashes. It was symbolic. Pure. And the

last warning I would get when it came to the capabilities of my little wife. It was a harsh reminder of what I suddenly didn't want to admit to myself.

Jaden didn't need me.

Not in the way I wanted her to need me.

She was her own rescuer, and she was not dependent on me to protect her anymore.

I should be praising her, should be relishing in her victory, proud of the devastation she was capable of, especially since she was an extension of me. But I'm a selfish man. So all I could do was compare myself and how I failed her. How I should have been there to save her so she didn't have to save herself. I put her through so much training, so many harsh lessons and brutal trials, and she surpassed them all. This was the final one. And she fucking demolished it.

I'd been so wrong, or maybe just in denial. I didn't want to believe she was as capable as she was, didn't want to admit how good she was, how strong she was, and how dangerous she could be. Which was why I'd sent my own men after her, to relieve myself of that fear, that she was still obtainable, still dependent on me and my protection, vulnerable to me and what I could do.

But after this? I'd never felt so useless and inadequate in my fucking life. The recognition of an insecurity I wasn't prepared to accept was a poison to my very being. What the fuck good was I if I couldn't even protect my own wife from my enemies? With her tracker down, if we hadn't arrived when we did, she could have easily taken one of those vans and disappeared, escaping me once again. But I refused to give light to any of those thoughts. I was the best at fucking everything, untouchable, indestructible, my fierce reputation legendary, bringing with it the fear and respect I deserved.

And now my wife was earning herself the same reputation.

And I couldn't fault her for it because I had trained her to be this way, to show the world that she was a force to be reckoned with in equal measure to me. And she had certainly proved that to me tonight, even after I had literally just told her to her face that she wasn't ready for it. And here she was, making me eat my own damn words through gritted teeth.

I'd never hear the end of this.

Why was it that every time Jaden met my expectations, she pushed it to a new boundary I never anticipated? She changed the dynamic every time.



And then left me stunned after I realized what she'd done.

Fuck. Maybe I was the one who wasn't ready.

Breaking my silent moment, Sid entered the room, practically out of breath. "How is she?" he asked as he moved toward the bed.

"Asleep," I told him as I covered her body with the bedsheet. "Try not to wake her."

"And Kayla?"

"Presumably dead," I answered.

Sid lowered his eyes to the floor. "Shit," he muttered under his breath. "She must be devastated."

Nodding, I stood from the bed to make room for Sid, folding my arms as he crossed the room and set up shop on the bed to examine Jaden. There wasn't much he could determine while she was asleep, but I trusted him to do everything he could.

"She seems fine for now, but get me as soon as she wakes up."

"Will do," I replied.

He stood, his eyes never leaving her form, but he couldn't hide the concern on his face.

"What the hell happened to her?"

*Everything.*

"Aside from a rollover car accident, I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

"You understand this could alter your behavior pattern for her, right?"

He had no fucking clue how different things were likely about to be. What didn't kill you only made you stronger. Jaden would be a new animal after this. The question was how to keep that animal under my control.

Opening the bedroom door, I held it open for him, not interested in having that conversation with him right now. "I'll let you know when she wakes up."

Sid sighed as he grabbed his bag and left the room without another word.

Shutting it behind him, I stripped from my clothes and gear and collapsed on the bed next to Jaden, wondering if I would be able to sleep now that I had her back and in one piece. Gathering her small body in my arms, I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of her breathing, taking comfort in the feel of her pulse against my skin.

When I woke up again a few hours later, I almost jumped out of my fucking skin when I realized she was no longer in bed. I was a light sleeper for a reason, so how the fuck had she managed to sneak out of bed without my noticing?

Listening for literally any movement in the bedroom, I breathed a short sigh of relief when I heard the shower running. Checking the time, it was four in the morning. What the hell was she doing up?

Marching into the bathroom, I pulled the shower door open to find Jaden standing under the spray, her back to me while her hands rested on the tile in front of her. Her back was a roadmap of war, scrapes, and bruises in patterns that resembled a damn Dalmatian. A fresh spark of ferocity ignited in my bones at the sight.

I was the only one allowed to mark and bruise that body. My initials carved into her ass declared that loud and fucking clear.

“Jaden, what are you doing?”

She didn’t turn around. “I told you I needed a shower.”

“You should be resting,” I said as I stepped inside, shutting the door behind me.

The water was fucking freezing as it fell over my chest, but I ignored the temperature for greater concerns. Gently taking her shoulders in my hands, I turned her around to face me and pushed her wet hair out of her face.

“Tell me what happened.” I shouldn’t be pushing her for this right now, but if she had enough energy to shower, then she had enough to talk before she forgot everything.

Instead of the explanation I was hoping to get, her eyes pinned me with a glare I wasn’t expecting. “Did you negotiate for my release and not Kayla’s?” Her voice was calm, but the tone indicated she was furious inside. She came out swinging right from the fucking gate.

The idea of the term *negotiated* was comical. I didn’t negotiate shit when it came to her. What I did do was explain what I expected from Tony, and if he didn’t deliver, I’d cut his fucking head off. But Kayla’s situation was Matt’s problem, and since he didn’t want me involved in his shit from the beginning, then he could handle it on his own to the end. I knew they wouldn’t release Kayla without Matt signing several of his enterprises over to Tony, and even then, I doubted she would have been returned in one piece.

“You will always be my priority, Jaden. So yes, I arranged for your release under the guise that I would use you and whoever brought you to me to get her back for Matt.”

“And you actually thought I would leave without her?” she asked, her voice fuming with rage.

And suddenly everything clicked, the spell that had stunned my senses and reasoning finally lifting. Why the van never showed up, why the building had blown, why she stayed behind, and why she looked like she’d been through hell. It wasn’t because they had attacked her first, it was because she decided to disregard my orders for her release and go off on her own little war mission because of Kayla. Only she’d been too late. And in the process, she’d almost gotten herself killed.

*Goddamn this fucking girl.*

Pressing my hand into her chest, I pushed her against the tiled wall, pinning her in place and scowling down at her with fresh anger radiating in my veins.

“What the fuck did you do, Jaden?” I growled down at her, the venom in my voice leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn’t want to believe that she would disobey me and go off on an arbitrary suicide mission just for Kayla, but if that was what happened, we were going to have a serious problem.

“Nothing more than what you would have done had you been in my position,” she answered, her brows knitted together as she stood her ground.

“So, because you didn’t want to leave without her, you deliberately disregarded what I’d arranged for you so you could put yourself in danger?”

The wrath coming from her body was so palpable I swore the water was beginning to heat again.

“Ya know what, Darren, you can go to hell and so can whatever bullshit *arrangements* you think you made, as if that means anything to me. You weren’t there. It was me and her, until it was just me. And in case you didn’t notice, I fucking destroyed that place and everyone in it. I stand by what I did, and I don’t give a shit how you feel about it.”

And there was the mouthy attitude I was expecting. It was always a turn-on when she stood up to me, but it was even better when I got to fuck her right back into submission. And I could see how badly we both needed that at this very moment.

Stepping in closer, I caged her body against the tile with mine, reminding her of exactly how small she was compared to me and how vulnerable she still was. And she noticed it immediately, her breath catching as she sensed the threat I was presenting with just my superior body and strength alone. Her eyes dilated with both fear and anticipation. I was willing to bet she was already getting wet, especially with my hard cock pressing into her belly.

She might be safe from our enemies, but she would never be safe from me.

Keeping my one hand against her chest, I took her jaw in my other, gently grazing my thumb over her lips. “So it was revenge then? Was that it?”

Her eyes searched mine, the fire in her gaze telling me all I needed to know. “It started as a rescue mission. And then turned into revenge. I wasn’t about to let you have all the fun when you eventually found me or them. Plus, I also had something to prove. And I think I made my point loud and clear.”

The corner of her mouth lifted just enough for me to catch the confidence in her words. She knew she had proven me wrong, but I couldn’t let her stand on that pedestal. What she did was impressive for someone of her size and strength, but it was also incredibly dangerous and reckless, and I couldn’t allow her to believe that was acceptable. Her first instinct should have been to flee, not search and destroy. Her priority should have been getting back to me, not finding Kayla to then avenge her death.

“When I’m convinced you’re in better shape, you’re going to give me every single minute detail of what happened, but make no mistake, my little wife, what happened changes nothing. You actually did what I *trained* you to do, and you did it very well. You’ve officially gained my confidence in your ability to protect yourself.” Moving my hand from her chest down to her thigh, I lifted her leg to wrap it around my hip, my aching cock slipping into her tight slick pussy, her heat eliciting a groan from deep in my throat as she sucked in a breath. “But you’ve also proven to be incredibly reckless and irrational, which means I still can’t trust you on your own.”

Pushing in deeper, I lifted her up to impale her onto my cock, her sexy little gasp making me harder as I wrapped her legs around my waist. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she moved to steady herself, but she didn’t fight me. I felt compelled to claim her all over again, my possessiveness

going into overdrive with a need to remind her that she belonged to me, that she was to obey me in all things, whether I was physically present or not.

“You have no idea what I would do to secure your safety, and knowing you threw that all away for the sake of Kayla pisses me off like you wouldn’t believe. It appears you have very little respect for the things I do for you.” Driving in hard, I took what was mine, bringing Jaden to the brink of distraction as I reprimanded her with my words and my cock. “You should know better than that.”

She bit her bottom lip, fighting back the moans I knew she wanted to give voice to. “And you should know I would never leave my friend behind,” she argued as she clenched around me.

Changing my angle, I pressed in hard with a punishing thrust, hitting her G-spot to mix pain and pleasure and forcing that beautiful cry from her lips.

“You don’t have any fucking friends. At least not anymore.”

She paused, pulling back to gape at me in disbelief as tears suddenly burst from her eyes. Her reaction was just enough to distract me as she managed to slap me right across the face. Ignoring the growing sting in my cheek, I caught her left wrist and slammed it against the tiles, my other hand going for her throat and squeezing just enough to get her attention.

“Where the fuck is your engagement ring?”

More tears rolled down her face, falling onto my forearm, as I continued to fuck her at a slower pace. “You expect me to share concern for a piece of fucking carbon over an actual person I cared about. Your priorities are seriously fucked.”

“Answer the fucking question, Jaden,” I raged at her.

“They took it!” she shouted, her chest heaving up and down for breath as I began to fuck her harder. “I don’t know what they did with it.” Her walls were clenching around my cock, the signs she was close to coming.

“Why did they take it?”

She moaned loudly, that sound making me twitch inside her. “Because I punched one of them in the mouth with it, so they took it from me.”

I actually believed that, especially since I had it designed exactly for that purpose.

Speeding up my pace, I fucked her against that tile until she was writhing against me, coming all over my cock as I spilled into her, marking what was mine from the inside out.

Sliding out of her, I placed her back on her feet, only to keep her steady against me as she swayed. After cleaning her up, I carried her from the shower, towed her and myself off, dabbing at the wet choppy remaining lengths of her hair. Sighing in unabashed disappointment, I gripped the strands and tugged, catching her attention.

“What happened to your hair?”

She looked up at me with sleepy irritated eyes. “I cut it. It got in the way.”

A fucking tragedy and I growled to let her know it.

“It was either my hair or my survival, Darren. It’s just hair. It’ll grow back,” she added.

“Lucky for you,” I said as I tossed the towel to the floor and picked her up.

She didn’t say another word as I carried her back to bed, her eyes closing as I laid her down and climbed in next to her. Pulling her to my chest, I found relief as her small body rested perfectly against mine, her breathing bringing the calm I needed to relax my mind and slow my pulse to less than raging. She was asleep within seconds.

Now that I finally had her back in my arms, I felt compelled to lock her away again, to keep her so confined and away from the outside world I’d never have to worry about losing her again. Tony’s threat was no more, along with everyone who worked for him because if anyone in that company thought they could control the signal that alerts me of my wife’s constant location, they were gravely mistaken. That would be tomorrow’s top priority after I got Jaden back home and secured.

I stared down at my half-eaten dinner, my entire body consumed with anxiety after what had happened. It'd been three days since the incident. Darren took me back to the estate the following morning after Sid had declared I was fine. Sid had tried to pry more information from me, checking on my mental state, trying to decipher what my behavior would be like, especially in the coming future. But I gave him the reassurance he was looking for so he would clear me.

But even as we flew back to the estate, all I could think about was Kayla. I'd given myself an out just in case they somehow managed to find her by telling Darren I never actually saw a body since it was always safe to assume the worst. I just hoped she'd gotten those girls to safety and that she was out of the country by now. Maybe she had even already contacted Jason. It was too much to hope for, especially with it only being a few days.

But now I was back to doing the same fucking thing I hated – waiting. Waiting for the next opportunity. Waiting for the next move. And I knew it would be a long time before that happened. Darren had already banished me back to the estate again, not allowing me to leave unless he and several guards were with me.

After grilling me for what felt like hours, I gave him as much information as I could about Tony and what had happened. I left a lot of it out, simplifying it as best I could without compromising the truth. He seemed to buy it, especially when Scott confirmed the likelihood of my story after his sweep of the building, or at least what was left of it. I never thought there would come a time when I would learn how to properly lie to Darren, but given the scenario, he seemed accepting of my answers.

At least I was given some reprieve since I was technically grieving for the loss of my friend, my dull attitude perfectly acceptable for the time being. There would be no funeral for Kayla. Why would there be? It wasn't like Matt would have one just for himself or for me. But I didn't make an issue of it. I instead honored her memory by dropping some flowers into the ocean at the end of the dock, sending her my best in hopes she would make it. It surprised me that Darren offered his sympathies as he watched the little flowers float away into the distance. His cruel reminder from the shower was not lost on me, but I chose to ignore it. He was a bastard through and through. I couldn't expect anything less.

While he doted on me more than usual, constantly checking on my injuries, he was still fixated on hunting down everyone who worked for Tony's company, ensuring everyone who worked there was either dead or under Darren's control. That didn't take very long to accomplish. Apparently when I destroyed that building and all of its inhabitants, I took away Darren's outlet for his vengeance against those who'd taken me. So without that, he had to find another avenue to ensure his wrath was also heard around the world. I might have destroyed the building and the owner, but he slaughtered the company and made himself captain. He wouldn't have to worry about anyone interrupting my GPS signal again.

"Jaden, you need to finish your plate," Darren reminded me, interrupting me from my thoughts.

I shook my head, tucking my freshly cut hair behind my ears. I was actually grateful that Darren had Anya and Irina come to fix my chopped mess. The ragged ends from my blade weren't exactly my best look. Looking down at the half-eaten potatoes and chicken, my stomach soured. It was a small plate to begin with, but my appetite was particularly smaller at the moment.

"I'm just not very hungry right now."

"You know that excuse doesn't work on me," he answered as he pushed his empty plate away.

I sighed. If only Camaro were allowed at the dinner table with us. She'd clear this plate in a nanosecond.

"How are Clive and Owen?" I asked, attempting a distraction. I knew they were on site, but Darren hadn't cleared them for duty yet since they were still healing from their gunshot wounds. I didn't know why, but I was sort of glad to hear Clive had lived.



“They’re fine. Owen should be back to his schedule next week and Clive in the next two weeks. Now finish eating.”

I nodded in acknowledgment, taking another small bite of my potatoes. “And Matt? How’s he doing?” I asked bitterly.

It was a stupid question, but I truly wondered if he actually gave a fuck about Kayla, even after all the shit he put her through. I wanted to know if he suffered from her loss.

Setting his drink down rather hard against the table, Darren glared at me. “Now why the fuck would he be a concern of yours?”

God, his jealousy was obnoxious and volatile.

I scowled back at him. “Did he even care about her at all?”

Darren leaned forward, his heavily tattooed forearms pressing into the table, the sleeves of his rolled-up dress shirt bunching at his elbows, reminding me of all the hard muscle underneath that skin and the threats that came with it. That gesture was all I needed to know I was walking on thin ice.

“If he didn’t care about her, he wouldn’t have bothered to negotiate with Tony. He wouldn’t have been there with me, trying to get her back. Matt blames himself, as he should. He was an idiot for not telling me about the threats against Kayla and having her around you. Had I known, things would have been very different, and Kayla would probably still be here. That is a mistake he will have to learn to live with.”

“Tony told me Matt was directly responsible for the death of his niece. How so?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I scoffed. “It’s the reason I was taken. I deserve to know.”

“It doesn’t matter. Tony should have known better than to fuck with my closest allies from the beginning, and Matt should have come to me. Now Tony is dead, and Matt lost something very precious to him.”

“*Someone*,” I corrected, holding his gaze. “Matt lost *someone* very precious to him. Kayla wasn’t a thing, Darren. She was a person.”

With his eyes blaring into mine, he was about to say something when Scott walked into the dining room with a phone at his ear. “Hold on,” he said into the phone and then handed it to Darren. “You’re going to want to take this.” When Darren took the phone, suspicion lighting up his face, Scott took my arm in his hold. “Come with me, Jaden. You need to leave the room. Now.”

My face warped with confusion, I got up from the chair and followed Scott out of the room and down the hall. “What the hell was that all about?” I asked him.

Scott looked down at me with a grim face. “Dominic’s been killed.”

I felt my entire body stiffen, like an electric rod had just shot through my spine, afraid that maybe I had heard him wrong.

“What? How? When?”

“His body was found in a duffel bag fifteen minutes ago at one of our warehouses. He was in pieces.”

I felt my blood begin to rush, my heart fluttering like a damn hummingbird on crack.

Holy shit.

“Do we know who?”

Scott nodded. “Javier Spade. Apparently, Dominic went down there to renegotiate their contract against Darren’s wishes. Obviously, things didn’t go so well.”

It took all the self-control I had to refrain from shaking. Against all odds and expectations, my plan had actually worked. Regina must have convinced Dominic to disobey Darren and go down to Honduras himself. The dominos were falling. Holy fuck, I could barely catch my breath.

“What happens now?”

And right on cue, the sound of absolute chaos erupted, echoing off the walls and blasting straight into my gut. The clash of dishes breaking, of wood splintering, of walls crumbling, of a man raging and roaring like a beast unlike anything I’d ever heard slammed into my chest like Darren had struck me himself.

“You should go upstairs now. Find a room and stay there. Shit is going to be chaotic for a little while.”

Nodding, I didn’t look back as I made my way up the stairs, quickly closing the door behind me as I entered my den. Camaro rushed toward me from her bed, whining at me from my obvious state of distress.

Lowering myself to the floor, I put my arms around my dog and held her for a while, her chin resting on my shoulder as she cuddled me as best she could. I was seriously going to lose my shit if I didn’t catch my fucking breath. I couldn’t believe it had actually happened. The wheels were officially set in motion, far greater than I had imagined.

Darren’s brother was dead.

His relationship with Matt was rocky.

Kayla was free.

Jason was on the hunt.

And now Darren had to go to war to avenge his brother.

The dominos were certainly falling, and falling all at once. Shit was about to get real now that things have escalated the way they have. And I needed to be ready. Because now that the train had left the station, there was no turning back.

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I stared down at the silver-gray tombstone, the one with my youngest brother's name carved into it. Just a name, date of birth, and date of death. Nothing else. No special words to carry him onto the next world, nothing to relieve the grieving, nothing to remind anyone of the kind of person he was while he was alive – a complete fucking dumbshit.

I had told him not to go down there. I had told him what would happen if he did and what I would have to do. Dan and I practically beat it into his stupid arrogant face when he tried to argue with me. I thought I had him convinced to let me handle Javier. But no, not Dominic. He played by his own rules. And they cut him to pieces for it.

Javier didn't even need to leave me an explanation. I already knew Dominic's mouth would eventually be the death of him. And now, once again, I would have to clean up his fucking mess.

I stood on as the coffin was lowered into the grave, the remains of my brother's body sinking deep into the ground next to the grave of my mother and father. Less than a hundred people surrounded the plot, all in attendance for the funeral, offering me and Dan and even Regina their condolences while we shook their hands. Her presence next to me was fucking repulsive. She'd been married to Dominic for less than a week, and she was already a widow and officially my goddamn responsibility. I expected the same thing for Jaden from my brothers should anything happen to me. But Regina was becoming a different story.

I couldn't help but wonder how much of her selfish attitude had influenced Dominic into going down there. But I couldn't allow myself to

linger on that here. I had to get through this goddamn funeral first, to speak to people I had no interest in conversing with at the moment.

It was just a formality, a show of respect, but their eyes all held the same caution. They knew a storm was coming, and they knew I was bringing it right to Javier's doorstep.

We were officially at war.

Turf wars and contract squabbles were different. I'd settled plenty of those with enough brutality to send a clear message to anyone who wanted to do business with me. Keep straight, follow the terms of the deal, and you live to see your next dollar. Betray those terms in any way, and you will find my remedial clause to be far less than forgiving.

But Javier's actions weren't just some simple breach of contract. They were a deliberate action of war. Javier had to have known what he was doing when he killed Dominic; he had to have known how Dan and I would react, and what we would do in response.

There was no way I could allow him to live after this. And he either didn't care or was completely prepared for those consequences. And likely so was Miguel, his older brother. But Dominic's men didn't give a shit about Javier and neither did my men. They were eager to retaliate. Their thirst for bloodshed would be easily satisfied in Honduras where they could murder and maim in broad daylight, and the police would just look the other way. Their lives were not worth getting in the middle of a war they knew nothing about, especially when they were paid well to ignore it.

And there would be a war.

There would be blood in the streets. Families destroyed. Alliances decimated. Until there was nothing left of Javier Spade. And if his brother chose to retaliate, then I'd destroy his ass too. And the world would be reminded once again of what happened when you fucked with me and my family.

I stood off to the side, watching Darren accept condolences and sympathies from the guests of the funeral with a solemn expression on his face, making conversation with them like he hadn't just lost his brother in a very grotesque way. His grieving process was not at all what I expected, if you could even call it grieving. I don't even know what I expected, but it certainly wasn't this calm and dark demeanor, the calm before the storm I suppose.

The dining room took the brunt of Darren's rage after he got the news, the damn room no longer in existence. And here I thought what I had done to that suite in Rome had been bad. After witnessing the aftermath of his destruction, I had never been more grateful for Scott's intervention.

Yet even after all the production of the day, the well wishes, apologies, and the offers for retribution and loyalty, Darren still didn't own an ounce of my sympathy.

I still remembered the screams of my uncle as Darren's men tortured him before finally killing him. I remembered watching that horrible video while Darren fucked me in that jail cell before shattering my ribs, jaw, and wrists. I remembered the threats he made about hunting down each member of my family and murdering them so I would have nothing left to return to if I tried to escape. I remembered all the times Darren spoke to me about the joy he'd get by killing Jason and making me watch just so I would know who I belonged to.

Guilt and sympathy didn't belong in Darren's world, so I refused to feel it. At least in this scenario.

Taking in the rest of the guests, I recognized quite a lot of them from our wedding, but there was one guest I was surprised I didn't see – Matt. Shouldn't he be present for his best friend's brother's funeral? It had only been a week since I told him Kayla was dead. Was he still hung up over it or was Darren still pissed at him for what happened? I would have figured the death of a brother would have been enough to end whatever squabble there might be but maybe not. I'd have to keep my assumptions to myself, though. Darren wouldn't like me asking about him after the way he snapped at me the last time.

Taking a walk through the crowd that had scattered through the small cemetery, I found Katherine sitting on a stone bench with her daughter sitting on her lap. Taking the rare opportunity, I made my way over to her.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked, keeping my voice as innocent as possible. "These heels are killing me."

"Of course," she said, scooting over so I had room to sit. "Please sit. I'm so glad to hear you're okay after everything that happened. I'm so sorry to hear about your friend."

Taking the seat next to her, I smoothed out my lacy black dress and tried to relax. "Thank you. I'm fine now, though."

"That's good then."

Turning in my seat, I gave Ella a quick smile. “I know it hasn’t been that long, but she seems to be growing like a weed,” I commented.

Katherine smiled as she bounced Ella on her lap. “Yeah, she has been growing pretty quickly. Almost too quickly. But she’s a welcomed distraction.”

I nodded in understanding. “How’s Daniel doing?” I asked.

She sighed as she stared off into the distance, her shoulders sagging slightly. “He’s worse than he appears,” she revealed quietly. “He’ll be out for blood and lots of it too.” She shook her head, her eyes glazing over as she shuddered. “It’s starting all over again.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering if I would finally get the truth of the past.

“What do you mean?”

“War,” she answered on a whisper. But as she paused, her voice suddenly became bolder. “And I’m not just talking about a squabble that’s over in a few weeks or maybe even months. I’m talking about years.”

“Katherine, what happened?” I practically pleaded with her. “Please tell me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, her breathing becoming harsher as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “Fuck it all,” she finally muttered to herself before she wiped her cheek and turned to address me. “I was very young when this all began, you know, I think maybe five years old. But I remembered for the following five straight years, my entire family and I were in constant fear for our lives. We were being blamed for the murder of Diana Davis, Darren’s mother. My family was by no means innocent; they were just as ruthless and dirty as Darren’s family and just as big. But we had nothing to do with Diana’s murder.”

It was like she was trying to convince me that her family was innocent. Like I was some juror ready to pass judgment on her. But I believed her because I had the written truth in my possession. I nodded for her to continue.

“We weren’t believed, of course. Warren said he received our calling card loud and clear. It only made sense since we’d been enemies for decades. We fought them off as best we could for as long as we could, our childhood mutilated and warped by Warren’s obsessive need to avenge his wife, and Darren was only too eager to make his father proud. We lost so many loved ones, so many friends, millions of dollars spent until we were

bankrupt and crippled. It was when Darren killed my younger sister that my father finally broke down and made a deal with Warren.”

I suddenly felt like I’d been punched in the chest, my heart clenching with grief for Katherine. Darren had been the one who killed Ella. My heart instantly shattered.

“How old was she?” *Christ, did I even want to know?*

“Nine,” she murmured. “She was nine. And I was ten.”

“Jesus,” I whispered, suddenly sick to my stomach. Darren was eleven when his mother was murdered, which means he was sixteen when he killed Ella – when he killed an innocent child. “I’m so sorry, Katherine.”

“My father wasn’t willing to lose another child to the war, so he finally agreed to Warren’s terms.”

“What deal did he make?” I asked, fearful of the answer.

“That he, his company, and his family would essentially become slaves to Warren’s empire. They took over all of our businesses and gave us just enough of the profits to keep us afloat. All of our employees, our housing staff, and security all belonged to them. And Warren decided that when I became of age, I would marry one of his son’s as the final agreement of the bargain to tie our families together.”

What the actual fuck. What century was Darren’s father living in?

“So for the next eight years, my upbringing changed. I was raised to be the perfect wife, the perfect lover, the most obedient woman you could have imagined. I had a job to do, a singular purpose, and to fail was a dishonor to my family and my sister’s memory. But my compliance was for the survival of my family. So I did what I had to do to ensure that.”

My mind was racing with the new information, so many puzzle pieces finally clicking into place to form the picture I knew was real in my head. Why Darren hated Katherine so much, why he didn’t want me around her, why she was so soft-spoken and submissive all the time. Everything finally made sense.

“When I turned eighteen, I was first presented to Darren, the man who murdered my little sister. But thankfully, we were repulsed by each other, so I was presented to Daniel next. He’s only three years older than me, so at twenty-one years old, he was nowhere near ready to be married yet. But I was promised to him nonetheless, and he managed to control my life for another five years even when he wasn’t technically in it. I was to remain untouched until our wedding night, men were not allowed to talk to me nor



I to them, I was placed on a strict diet and exercise schedule, I couldn't work, couldn't go to school, while he fucked his way through every girl he could find, including Regina."

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. So she had successfully fucked all three of them – Darren, Daniel, and Dominic. Talk about sloppy seconds and thirds.

"At twenty-six, he decided he was ready to marry, and two years later, he decided he wanted to be a father. She's the only gift he's ever given me, and I have no regrets when it comes to her." Her eyes watering again as she looked on at Ella.

"My whole life has been warped by a lie, framed by a war we had no part in starting. We weren't good people, Jaden, but we didn't kill Darren's mother."

Placing my hand on Katherine's shoulder, I shared my sympathy with her. It didn't look like it had ever occurred to Darren's mother how many people would be affected by her decision to start a war, or maybe she just didn't care.

Did I care?

"Katherine, what if I were to tell you that I had evidence that exonerated your family?" I offered her. My gut was telling me I could trust her and that she deserved to know the truth.

Katherine sniffed back a tear as she turned to me. "How?"

"I found a letter written by Diana hidden away in one of Darren's favorite books explaining what she'd done. She ordered a hitman to shoot her in front of Warren in public so that he would be forced to retaliate. She picked your family because she thought you guys were strong enough to take Warren down in hopes that Darren, and Daniel, and Dominic would be free from him, and they could grow up to have normal lives. She saw they were becoming monsters and didn't know what else to do, especially because she had so little time left. She had ovarian cancer."

"Oh, my God," Katherine whispered under her breath. "That is ... insane."

"I know. I'm sorry for what she did to you."

She shook her head. "What's done is done. The real question is what are you going to do with that letter? Because you obviously haven't told Darren."

“I honestly don’t know what I’m going to do with it. But I don’t really plan on telling him now.”

She nodded at my answer. “Then this conversation never happened.”

“Agreed,” I said and stood. “I hope you know I’m on your side, Katherine. If you ever need a friend, I’m here.”

“I appreciate that,” she said with a sad smile. “Same to you as well.”

Leaving Katherine to be with her daughter, I headed back toward the burial, my thoughts still lingering on the final piece of the story that finally put everything into perspective. My heart pulsed with disgust knowing Darren had pulled the trigger on a damn child while he was still barely a child himself. I also couldn’t imagine being forced to marry the man responsible for killing your sister, and I was glad Katherine had been spared that fate. Although it wasn’t like Daniel was much of an upgrade. But it made me pause for a moment. Was I jeopardizing another child to the same fate? A lot of people were now going to die because of me.

*That’s the point, idiot.*

I shook my head, willing my trepidations away. If I didn’t stop Darren, there could be far more children who could grow up to be trapped by him in this hellish world he created.

No, I needed to be there to steer the course, to continue influencing what I could, and prevent innocent casualties if possible. The train was already in motion. The only thing I could do at this point was hopefully guide the damn thing in the right direction.

Solidifying my convictions, I walked slowly through the crowd, watching the guests glance at me only to move out of my way like I was parting the sea. The women steered clear of me as they eyed me from afar, their expressions showing caution yet nodding in respect while the men didn’t know what to make of me.

Apparently, the story of my kidnapping had gotten around, and my reputation was officially born. As I walked through the crowd, my hands resting casually in the pockets of my dress, I felt a certain power come over me, a dark aura that rested on my shoulders, draping over me like a cape, bringing with it an entitled confidence I would wear proudly.

Was this what Darren felt when he walked through a crowd? Could he sense the fear in others? Float from the high that came with the respect?

This feeling. This was what he said he wanted for me.

And I could tell how much he regretted it.

He'd never admit it, but he never dreamed I would be this capable. This influential. This dangerous. But actions had consequences. He made me the monster that I was, and he would have to live with that. Maybe it was his turn to adapt for once.

Making my way to the burial, I stopped as I watched the diggers start to bury the casket, the rest of the crowd beginning to depart. But as I looked to my left, I noticed Regina standing at the end of the grave, looking incredibly nervous.

Seizing another opportunity, I made my way over to her. "My condolences to the widow," I said bluntly, hoping to stir her up. In my world, it was rude and grossly inappropriate, but in Darren's world, it was warranted. My justification scale was seriously warped now.

The scowl I got from her as she looked up at me was one I would never forget.

"You. Manipulative. Little. Bitch."

I tilted my head at her, hiding my smirk the best I could, knowing I was failing.

"Excuse me?" I replied darkly.

"You knew this would happen," she declared, pointing down at Dominic's grave.

I nodded. "Yes, I did. Which was why I warned you to listen to Darren."

She was right, of course, but she was the idiot who easily fell for the reverse psychology. And it had cost her the ticket to the kingdom she wanted so badly.

"Oh no," she argued, shaking her head. "You wanted this to happen. You hated Dominic."

"Did I?" tilting my head at her. "Why would I want him dead? It's not like I'm the one who's set to inherit his millions, now am I?"

"You shut your mouth!" she snarled at me.

"Oh, come on, Regina. This was probably your plan all along. Marry Dominic, get him killed, take his money, and move on to the next one like the little leech you are."

"Is that true?" said a voice behind Regina, silencing us both.

Looking over, I saw Daniel eyeing Regina as though she was an insect at the bottom of his shoe. But the moment I noticed the Glock in his hand, my heart started to pound.

“Of course not!” she almost shouted. “How could you even think that of me!”

“Are you sure, Regina? Because I’ve watched you closely for a very long time, and it seems exactly like something you would do,” Daniel continued as he walked closer to her.

“No! No way! I loved him! He was everything to me!”

I scoffed at the lie as I shook my head at her.

“After what? Two weeks. Yeah, right. The only thing you loved was his money and his drugs,” he countered.

She scoffed, stomping her black stiletto in the grass. “I will not be insulted at my own husband’s funeral!”

“Did you tell Dominic to go to Honduras, Regina?” I interjected. “When Daniel and Darren specifically told him not to?”

Her eyes lit up as she looked at me.

“He wouldn’t listen to me either! He wanted to go!”

“Then why didn’t you tell anyone he had left?” I continued, pushing the final domino over the edge. “It might have saved his life and prevented a war.”

Her breathing was starting to pick up, her panic becoming clear as she realized the danger she was now in.

“I ... I didn’t know!”

I scoffed again and shook my head with a tiny grin. She was a terrible liar, and as I looked over at Dan, he knew it too.

He shook his head at her as she turned back around to face Daniel, her face pleading with him not to do what we both know was about to happen.

“You’ve been nothing but trouble for this entire family. You’re a plague, Regina. Always have been. It ends now,” Daniel said and lifted his gun.

“Y-you can’t! Matt—”

“Dan! No!” Darren’s voice came booming just as Daniel pulled the trigger, the bullet striking through Regina’s forehead and sending her body to fall backward into Dominic’s grave, landing right on top of his casket with a thud.

In an instant, a swarm of guards surrounded the burial, the few remaining guests suddenly alert, stiff, and silent from the gunshot, their gasps filling the air as their eyes found us. Some of the men had even pulled their own guns.

Ripping me away from the burial, Darren yanked me to his side as he looked down at Regina's dead body before turning his shocked gaze to Daniel. "What have you done?"

"I avenged our brother!" he shouted in retort, pointing his gun at Regina's dead body. "That stupid whore manipulated Dominic into going to Honduras against your orders. He's dead because of her!"

"He's dead because of Spade! That bullet was meant for him, not her!" Darren argued as he shoved me behind him so he could face his brother. "Do you have any idea what you've just done?!"

"Fuck Matt and his stupid fucking oath!" Dan spat. "I'll crush him and Spade."

For the first time ever, Darren had no words. All he could do was stare down at Regina's body, her blood trickling onto the casket, splatters of it all over the flowers, while the grave diggers stood there like deer in headlights.

"You can bury her with him. Husband and wife together in death," Daniel said to them, before he holstered his gun and walked away.

*Holy shit.*

I remained very still next to Darren as he watched his brother leave with his family and several of their guards. It was like all the air had been sucked out of the atmosphere, leaving everyone breathless for their next move. All eyes were on Darren as he finally straightened, his jaw clenched tightly, and his eyes hardened.

"Take Jaden to the car," he ordered without looking at me and then walked off into the crowd with Scott.

"Mrs. Davis," one of the guards addressed me. "Please."

He didn't have to ask me a second time. Because my job here was officially done.

Placing my hands back in my pockets, my heart pounding away in my chest with unabashed exhilaration, I casually walked away from both of the deaths I had just caused and the subsequent wars that would soon follow.

With each step I took, I noticed how less and less guilty I felt over what I had done. In fact, it was difficult not to smile in the face of it. Because I was officially a fucking monster now, just like the rest of them, feeling nothing but absolute bliss from the demise of my enemies.

God, it was a high I couldn't even describe. A powerfully toxic endorphin that forced its way through my blood and left the most delicious taste of victory in my mouth. After all the traumas, the torture, and my

incessant need to survive it all, I was now poised for the impending destruction I intended to rein down on this dark world I'd been consumed by. My chemistry had changed, my responses and reactions altered, my entire being converted into the weapon Darren had no idea he had created. But it was his doing. Every step of it. He gave me all the keys I needed to evolve, but he had no idea how fast I'd unlock my potential ... and what I would fucking do with it.

I was going to make my final stand. I was going to end this. And God help anyone who stood in my way.

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## 2 Months Later

A little red dot blinked on my screen. The relentless tiny light pulsing with each second that passed, the only motivation driving me to my end goal.

Her.

By some miracle, I was able to use one of the collars we'd gotten from the women we rescued from that club in Rome to hack the satellite for all the signals it tracked. And I'd been staring at that dot ever since. My eyes couldn't look away. It was my beacon, my compass, leading me in the direction of my haven, a haven that was stolen away from her life. From her family. From me.

I made her a promise. I would protect her family. I would find her. And I wouldn't stop until she was free. No matter the cost.

"Jason," Romero called as he entered the room. "You ready?"

Looking up at him from the table, my eyes caught the bright blonde hair that lingered just behind his shoulder, her blue eyes catching my gaze as she looked at me with hope and fire. She was my bridge to Jaden now, the link connecting our worlds, and I intended to protect that link with my life. Because what we were about to do next was fucking insane.

I nodded at Romero. "Is she ready, though?"

There was silence for a moment as Romero beamed down at the blonde, a soft knowing smile on his lips, but he waited for her to answer for herself.

“I’m ready,” Kayla said, her eyes hardened as she stepped into the light.  
“I can handle him.”

Accepting her courage, I nodded as I pocketed my phone and stood.  
Ready as ever to finish this.

“All right, let’s go see Rainer.”

*To be continued in the fifth and final book, Stand.  
Coming soon ... but not too soon.*

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it and found it worth the wait! Please consider leaving a review wherever you purchased it to show your support! Thank you!

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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 jet skiing on her SeaDoo Spark Trixx during the Summer, trips to apple orchards in the Fall, snowboarding in the Winter, and basking in the sunshine when it returns in the Spring.

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## CONNECT WITH JAY

If you'd like to learn more about Jay, her series, or to donate to charities for victims of human trafficking, you can stalk her at all these different sites

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/Jay-Marie](http://www.facebook.com/Jay-Marie)

**Group:** [www.facebook.com/groups/The-Stronger-Circle](http://www.facebook.com/groups/The-Stronger-Circle)

**Page:** [www.facebook.com/JMarieSeries](http://www.facebook.com/JMarieSeries)

**Website:** [www.jaymarie.com](http://www.jaymarie.com)

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