



DARE TO BREAK

CHURCHILL BRADLEY ACADEMY BOOK ONE

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DARE TO BREAK

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DEDICATION

The book you hold in your hands should not exist.

Blame must be apportioned.

The primary instigator of this book, which became a duet, which became a trilogy ... and then a four-book series, goes by the name of *Samantha Lovelock* (she's an author and you should totally check out her books). She '*claimed*' she designed a cover but wasn't sure if it was any good. That cover, dear readers, is on the front of this book. Because that cover inspired an entire world.

So, when you read this book, and you are whispering "wtf" to yourself, you know who to blame.

Not L. Ann and not Claire Marta, but Samantha Lovelock.

Heartfelt thanks must be given to our alpha readers—in no particular order—Shani, Angela, Rebecca, Lisha, Crystal, Alycia, Kim, Deanna, and Rochelle. Their constant feedback, yells, and tears kept us writing. Their enjoyment and enthusiastic response to Eli and Arabella's story was beyond anything we ever expected.

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DEAR READER

This is a dark high school bully romance.

If you're expecting boys like the ones who were in your senior year at school—spotty, awkward, voices on the verge of breaking—you should close the cover and walk away. While the boys of Churchill Bradley Academy may have moments where they make excruciating gasp-inducing 'wtf did you just do?' decisions, these are *not* your typical seniors and the choices they make are often cruel and vindictive.

Within the walls of Churchill Bradley Academy, you are going to find bullies, blackmail, unwanted physical attention, murder, suspicious behaviour, and dark desires.

This is not a tale of star-crossed lovers. There are no sweet snatched kisses. There is no pure first love.

You will not find a heart-warming meet-cute within these pages. There are blindfolds and threesomes; threats and dares; talk of suicide, and instances of PTSD; safewords and hate sex; revenge and retaliation; a masked anonymous lover who summons you into the dark to play his games; and a stepbrother who will stop at nothing to break the stepsister he doesn't want.

Are you still here, Dear Reader?

Open the doors and join us inside Churchill Bradley Academy.

Red or Green, Dear Reader?

Are you brave enough to accept the dare?

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CHAPTER 1

ARABELLA

“Arabella, I’m home, and I’ve got some news.”

The peace and tranquility of my Sunday morning is shattered by my mother’s voice. I can’t stop an irritated sigh. I wish she’d called ahead to warn me she was coming back from her summer jaunt. August is all but over, and she spent most of it in Florida, blowing money we don’t have on parties and clothes.

Other than a few random phone calls to let me know she was alive; she’s neglected all her parental responsibilities. So much so, that I have been forced to take an after-school job at the local mall, just to cover the bills.

“Arabella? Where are you, honey?” The excitement in her voice is unmissable.

Resentment builds, but I push it back behind the rest of the emotions bottled up inside me. There’s *always* something new with Elena. I’ve known from an early age that Mom is more of a child than I am. It’s no wonder my dad left when I was born.

I draw in a deep calming breath, inhaling the aroma of freshly baked cinnamon cookies which lace the air. My latest batch is cooling on the counter, waiting to be packed up and taken next door to Mrs. Goldmann’s for her Bridge night with her friends.

I untie my apron and slip it off, eyeing the mess I’ve left over the counter.

“What is it this time, Elena?” I call her by her first name because she hates being called Mom.

The click of high heels moving toward the kitchen heralds her arrival, and a second later she appears in the doorway. She pauses in the doorway to strike a flawless runway model pose—hands on her hips, showing off her slender hourglass figure in the *new* black designer t-shirt and faded blue jeans she’s wearing. Platinum blonde curls frame her face. It’s not her natural color, but not far off.

She holds out her hand, with a wide smile. “Surprise! I got married.”

My heart stills at the sight of the huge, glittering diamond ring on her finger, and all I can do is gape at it.

“What?”

Elena giggles and beckons to someone in the hall. "This is Elliot. Darling, come in and say hello to your new stepdaughter."

This has to be a joke, right?

A man appears behind her. Tall, with salt and pepper hair, and broad shoulders which are emphasized by the cut of his jacket. He's handsome, and at least ten years older than Elena. He doesn't look like the usual type my mother falls in love with. There's an understated elegance about him. He steps around Elena and gives me a smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Arabella. Your mom has told me so much about you."

I'm hit with a sense of unreality and confusion. "You got married?"

My mother leans into the man at her side. "In Vegas. I'm Mrs. Travers now. Elliot says we can have your name legally changed to match, or he can adopt you."

I stare at her blankly, not really comprehending the words she's saying. "What happened to Carl?"

The smile falters on her lips, and she rests one perfectly manicured hand on Elliot's arm. "Could you give us a moment, darling? I think our news has sent my daughter into shock."

Shock is a fucking understatement.

The numbness encasing me cracks, and my heartbeat thuds in my ears.

Please, God. This can't be happening.

Elliot laughs, patting her hand. "Eli reacted in a similar way. I better go and chase him out of the car."

Elena places a kiss on his cheek, and he turns and walks down the hallway. The second he's out of sight, she turns back to me, her blue eyes hardening like ice. "Don't mention Carl again. He was boring, self-absorbed, shallow, and inexperienced. Elliot, on the other hand, is charming, caring, sexy as hell, and *rich*."

It's on the tip of my tongue to point out that she shares the same qualities as her now ex-boyfriend. Everything except inexperience, because we both know she can't keep her legs closed when she's around a man with money.

"He's a complete stranger!" Anger boils under my skin. "How long have you known him?"

"A week," she admits, with a careless shrug. "He proposed, and I accepted. Don't give me that look, Bella. Elliot is my soulmate."

I close my eyes and count slowly to ten in my head. Elena has always been rash and impulsive, but she's never been stupid before. A string of rich boyfriends paying her way is one thing, but *marrying* a man she barely knows? That's a new low.

Opening my eyes, I shake my head. "This is crazy even for you, Elena."

My mother's painted red lips twist. "Get off your high horse. The man has money, and he wants to take care of us. What's wrong with that? You should count your blessings. We won't have to worry about anything again."

"Do you love him?"

"*Love?*" She says the word as though it's something unpleasant. "What does that have to do with anything? I keep him happy in bed, and that's all that matters."

Bile rises in my throat, and I force myself to turn away from her. This is all going to end in a mess. The second dear old Elliot realizes what a brat my mother is, he'll demand a divorce. I grab the closest plastic tub, open the lid, and pile the warm cookies inside it.

"Are you sulking? Is this because you didn't come to the wedding?"

"I refuse to be part of this insanity."

"Don't be so dramatic."

I jam the lid on the full tub, and snap it shut. "I need to focus on getting ready for school. I don't have time for the next episode of *your* life."

She rests her hip against the counter beside me, and eyes the flour sprinkled over the surface. "About that." Her fingers tap the countertop. "I have some good news. We're moving into Elliot's house in the Hamptons."

My attention snaps to her face, and the laugh I was about to give dies on my lips. Within the span of ten minutes, my mother has ripped my comfortable little world apart. I feel like a tightrope walker without a safety net waiting to catch me.

"That's not fair." My voice trembles. "My whole life is here."

"Not anymore. Elliot has pulled some strings," She watches me closely. It makes me wonder how much of the emotion I'm feeling is betrayed on my face. "He got you a place in Churchill Bradley Academy."

"But all my friends—"

"You'll make new friends." She gives a dismissive wave of one hand. "The academy has a lot more to offer than the second-rate school you've been going to. It only takes students who can afford the expensive fees."

“You mean rich kids,” I reply hollowly. The resentment I carry toward her is clawing at me, desperate to be released. She doesn’t give a fuck that she’s screwing up my life.

“It’s a boarding school, so you’ll get to immerse yourself in all the academia you love so much.” Her voice is calm. Too calm. “I’ve already signed you up, Bella. Elliot has paid the fees for the year. Eli is a student there. You should be excited about a fresh start.”

My brows knit together at the name Elliot mentioned earlier, but I hadn’t paid much attention to it. “Eli?”

“His son.”

I’m not sure if I want to laugh or cry at the news. “Wait. He’s got a kid?”

She crosses her arms and pushes away from the counter. “He’s around the same age as you.”

I track her movements, as she browses through the stack of letters on the kitchen table.

“Jesus,” I mutter. “Can this get any worse?”

“You’ve always wanted a sibling.”

I snort. “You have to be joking, right?”

Anger tightens her features. “You are not going to ruin this for me. Be nice to your new stepbrother. That’s all I’m asking.”

I want to scream. It’s always about her wants and needs. My eyes sting, and I clench my teeth. It’s wrong to hate her, but I do. I can feel it chipping away like a pick against the dam, leaving chinks in it bit by bit, and I’m terrified at what might happen when it finally breaks. I curl my fingers into my palms, battling against the urge to claw out her eyes.

“Elena?” Elliot’s voice interrupts us.

She plasters a happy smile on her face, and sashays across to the doorway. “We’re still in the kitchen, darling.”

“I finally managed to convince Eli to come in and meet his new stepsister.” Elliot reappears with a boy in tow.

He’s not the preppy jock with the perfect white teeth I’ve been imagining. I’m sure his teeth *are* perfect; I can’t tell because his mouth is set in a thin line. His hair is raven-black, thick, and wild. Inky strands flop down over his forehead, and around his ears. It’s not long but not short, either. He has a pair of earbuds in his ears and whatever he’s listening to is loud enough to block out the sounds of the world around him. A tight black t-shirt hugs his chest, and his jeans are ripped at the knees. There’s a dark

gray, metallic-looking padlock on a chunky chain around his neck, and lip, nose, and eyebrow piercings complete his appearance.

Sharp green eyes clash with mine, and for one brief second, it's as though I've been sucked into the depths of a menacing storm. Cold prickles over my skin in reaction, and in that moment, I know in my heart that Eli Travers and I are not going to be friends.

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CHAPTER 2

ELI

My dad is a gullible fucking idiot.

“Eli, please take out the headphones while I’m talking to you.”

I blow out a breath and pop an earbud out of my right ear, but I don’t switch off the music. The tinny sound of thumping drums and screeching guitars is audible in the car’s interior.

“Come inside and meet your new stepsister.”

Fuck’s sake.

None of my annoyance shows on my face. In fact, a quick look at my reflection in the car’s window tells me that nothing at all shows. I’ve practiced wearing a blank expression for so long now that it’s second nature. I have to really concentrate in order to show any emotion. A survival technique I’ve perfected over the years.

“No, thanks. I’ll stay here.” I push the earbud back into place. I have absolutely no interest in meeting the daughter my father’s new wife has described as ‘super-studious and eager to be a part of the family.’ Eager to get her dirty fucking fingers on my dad’s money, more like.

“*Eli.*” He grasps my arm.

My eyes drop to look at the fingers gripping me, then rise slowly to meet those of my father. He lets go without me having to say a word. I fight against the urge to ask if he’s scared of me.

“Please, son. I know the last few years have been difficult, but this is our second chance at being a family. At *happiness*. Could you give it a *try*? Elena is working hard to be your friend.”

“I don’t need a friend *or* a new family.”

He sighs, and the hang-dog expression on his face makes my jaw clench. It’s a technique he’s been using since he brought his new wife home two days ago. It’s how he tries to get me to comply with what he wants.

I unclip the seatbelt. He might annoy the shit out of me but he’s still my dad, and since Mom died and he spent the six months following her death fucking up, he’s tried *everything* to breach the distance between us. Everything, that is, apart from the one thing that would work.

For four years, all I've wanted is a slice of his attention, to spend time as father and son. Instead, he threw money at me, and now he thinks buying a new mom is the way to my heart.

Fucking idiot.

"Fine."

He steps back so I can climb out of the car. The house ahead is small and neat ... And could fit into the entrance hall of our house in the Hamptons. God knows what trash I'm about to find inside. Not that my dad can see through the lies the bleached-blond Barbie doll is spinning. He's so fucking desperate to be happy, to fill the void left by my mom and bring us together, that he'll clutch at anything. It's pathetic really. Especially when all he needs to do is fucking *talk* to me.

But the plastic bimbo my father brought home and introduced as my new stepmom and her just-as-fake daughter won't be staying long. I'll make sure of that.

"They're waiting inside." My dad's words are accompanied by a wide excited smile.

I manage not to roll my eyes and follow him along the path to the front door, turning up the music in my ears on the way. I have no interest in what the new stepmom or her daughter has to say.

'Paranoid' by Palaye Royale is loud in my ears as I step inside. My lips curl up at the floral wallpaper covering the walls. Cheap landscape paintings in garish gold frames are placed at intervals, and there's a tacky 'No Place Like Home' sign above the door which leads into the kitchen.

Elena winds her hand around my dad's arm the second he steps inside. The move is clearly territorial.

Interesting. Does she feel threatened by her daughter or me? Can I use that?

His lips move as he says something I can't hear above my music. He glances at me and then waves his hand, indicating I enter the room and move ahead of him. I skirt around him and find myself in the tiniest kitchen in existence.

First impression is that there's been some kind of explosion or maybe a robbery. It's a fucking mess. White powder covers one surface. I wonder briefly if it's heroin or cocaine. Is stepsister dearest a dealer? That would answer so many questions. Maybe that's just wishful thinking though, because there's the smell of cinnamon in the air. A smell that twists my

stomach and reminds me of happier days. *Cinnamon cookies*—my dad's favorite treat and one my mom used to bake for him at least once a week. A tray of the sweet treats is balanced on top of the stove.

I shift my gaze from the cookies to the girl hovering nearby.

She's staring at me, blue eyes wide, hands clutched together in front of her stomach. There's almost a deer-in-headlights look about her. Was she as surprised as me by the wedding announcement? Not that I give a fuck. Those eyes widen more when I meet her gaze, and she takes a step back. Inwardly, I laugh. Driving her out is going to be so easy if all it takes is a glare and she's ready to run.

"Eli." My dad taps my arm just as the song playing in my ears comes to an end. "Please turn off the music, Son. I want you to meet Arabella. Your new sister."

"Stepsister," I correct him.

The bimbo laughs, high-pitched and teeth-achingly shrill. "*Darling*, there's no need to add the step. We're *family* now." She hooks her hand around my arm.

I turn my head to look at her. "Don't touch me." My voice is low.

She laughs again. I grit my teeth and peel her fingers off my skin. "Don't *fucking* touch me."

"Eli!" my dad barks.

Was that a spark of parental disapproval?

Well, I'll be damned. He still has some backbone, after all.

My lip curls. "Sorry, *Mom*."

That fake plastic smile falters, and I see a hint of the real woman beneath the act. She doesn't like me calling her mom. I doubt she likes me, *period*. That's perfectly fine with me. I don't like her either.

My attention returns to the girl on the other side of the kitchen, and I dip a hand into my pocket and turn off my music before another song starts while I check her out.

She hasn't spoken yet and I want to hear her voice. I don't give a fuck what she says. That's not relevant. But how she talks will give me a clue about who she is. Voices hide a multitude of secrets just waiting to be discovered ... and used.

"Darling, say hello to Eli." Elena instructs from somewhere behind me.

She stiffens at her mother's words, but steps forward, a smile fixed to her lips.

“Hello, Eli. I guess we’ve both had a bit of a shock today.” Her voice is hesitant, soft, and the complete opposite of her mother’s.

Today? My father brought the woman home two days ago, and announced he was in love. It took him another twelve hours to admit he’d married the woman looking around the house with hungry eyes and asking whether she could decorate.

She holds out a hand. I frown, then ignore it, while I analyze her voice. She doesn’t look or sound surprised. Somehow, I doubt her mother marrying someone a week after meeting them is a shock to her. I turn to look at my dad.

“I’ve done as you asked. I’m going back to the car now.” I tap play on my music, turn up the volume and walk out, ignoring my dad’s calls for me to wait.

He catches up to me as I reach the front door and tugs out one of my earbuds.

“That was rude.”

“So was coming home with a new wife.”

His cheeks redden. “She’s a wonderful woman, and she’ll be a good influence on you. We need a woman’s touch, Eli.”

“*You* might. I don’t. If she touches anything of mine, I’ll break her fingers.”

He sighs. “Son, please.”

I whirl to face him. “You know she’s not in love with you, don’t you? All she sees are dollar signs when she looks at you. I bet if you dig, you’ll find she’s behind on her payments for this place.” I wave a hand at the house. “You better have had a prenup in place.”

The look on his face told me the answer.

“Fuck’s sake. *You’re* supposed to be the fucking adult, not me. Call our lawyers and get a post-nup written out. If she loves you like you claim, she’ll sign it.”

“You can’t start married life with a contract, Eli.”

“Don’t be fucking stupid.”

I yank open the car door, climb in, and slam it shut, sealing myself inside. I tip my head back against the seat and close my eyes. There’s a throbbing behind my eyes, a tightness to my skull, and I’m so *fucking tired*.

I’m eighteen years old. I shouldn’t have to behave like the fucking parent, yet here I am. The only fucking voice of reason standing between

my father and poverty. My fingers drum against my thigh.

Okay, so maybe poverty is exaggerating a little. But that isn't the point. Who the fuck goes to Vegas for a business meeting and comes back with a wife?

I snort.

My dad, that's who.

Finding out I had a new stepmom when I got back from my friend's house a couple of days ago was annoying enough. When I discovered said stepmom came with a daughter, that was the fucking icing on the cake.

My dad means well, and he loves me. I know that. But *fuck me*, I don't know how my mom lived with him. He's an amazing businessman, but emotionally he's a fucking mess. Has been a mess since she died. At fourteen years old, I had to become the responsible one, making sure all the household bills were paid until my dad learned how to function without the woman he loved.

And now he wonders why I am the way I am.

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CHAPTER 3

ARABELLA

I try to swallow the sour taste on my tongue and swipe away the tears threatening to fall. The boxes on my bed blur. It's barely been a week since my mother announced we were moving. Everything was set in motion faster than I expected.

The hate I feel for my mother continues to bloom, eating away at the security I've lost. Not content with fucking up her own life, she's now intent on ruining mine.

"This sucks," Amanda, my best friend since I was six, grumbles. Her auburn hair is tied back in a messy bun, and she's dressed similarly to me in loose yoga pants and a t-shirt.

I clutch the pile of books she's just unloaded from the bookshelf and dump them on the bed.

"I can't believe Elena is making you move."

Sniffing, I brush the dampness from my cheeks with the back of my knuckles. "I can't believe she's selling the house. She wouldn't even listen to me when I begged her to rent it out."

The bitch is tearing away the only home I've ever known. She doesn't think we're going to need it now that she's found Elliot. I think she's a fucking fool.

My gaze wanders over the yellow wallpaper printed with canaries. Amanda helped me put it up one summer. We made a mess getting wallpaper paste in our hair. I can still remember our laughter and singing along to one of Imagine Dragons' latest songs.

My heart thrashes inside my chest, mourning the loss of happier times. Why can't I press rewind to the past? Go back and live in one of the happier moments. Forget the trauma of being Elena Travers' daughter.

"At least we can Facetime and call each other." Dropping more books into one of the empty boxes, she closes the flaps. "And we can visit during school holidays."

My watery gaze flicks to hers, and I give her a wan smile. "Of course, we will. Besties forever, right?"

“No matter where we are.” Amanda touches the beads of the multicolored friendship bracelet on her wrist that match the one I’m wearing. “Even when one of us gets to move into a mansion.”

“I’m not going to be there long.”

My fingers seek out the three charms hanging on my bracelet. I’m never going to take it off. It will be my talisman, reminding me I always have someone to talk to. That I’m not alone no matter where I am.

“A few days to store my stuff before I’m shipped off to boarding school.”

“Churchill Bradley Academy is a school set among acres of private, sprawling grounds, where young minds can be molded and thrive.” Amanda recites in her best impression of a posh accent, before breaking off to giggle. “I checked out their website. Their school mascot is a white and red rooster.”

The ache in my chest tightens painfully. “It sounds like a nightmare.”

She shrugs and picks up a box of tissues from my desk by the window. “Mean girls, jocks, rich nerds, and anti-social freaks. No matter how they pretty it up, the hierarchy of a school isn’t going to change.”

I catch the tissues she tosses at me, tug one out and mop up my face. “I just want to keep my head down and graduate. My twenty-year plan is in place, and I’m not going to let Elena take that from me.”

I can’t lose focus on my goals. I need straight-A grades, then I can apply for a fashion internship. If I can get my designs seen, I might have a chance to become a famous designer. I’m not foolish enough to think it’s all going to fall into my lap, but I cling to my dreams as tightly as I can. Arabella Gray will make a name for herself. I’m not going to turn out like my mother. No way in hell.

Amanda scrunches up her nose. “I wish I was as focused as you. I still don’t know what I want to do with my life.”

“I’ve been designing clothes since I was six.” I tuck a loose tendril of hair behind my ear and scan the rest of my half-packed-up life around me. “The second you know what you want to do as a career, it will click.”

I move back to the bookcase, while she grabs another handful of design books.

“What about your new stepbrother?”

Placing my sketchbooks into one of the boxes, I lay my pencils and pens on top. “What about him?”

“Are you going to try and be friends?”

I grimace, recalling the look in Eli's eyes when we were introduced in the kitchen. "I'm pretty sure he hated me on sight."

Her brown eyes fill with sympathy. "He's probably just as shocked as you are that your parents got married."

"Elena wants me to play happy families. As long as it means she leaves me alone, I'm willing to give it a try when we're all together."

"You're going to the same school."

"Which is big enough for us to keep out of each other's way." I wrap my arms around my waist, and hug myself tight, trying to ward off a sense of foreboding. "Let's be realistic. How long is the marriage going to last before Elliot realizes he's made an epic mistake? I give it six months at the most."

She rounds the bed and tugs me into her arms. "You know there's always room at my place if you want to run away."

"Thanks, Amanda."

"I mean it. I love you." She squeezes me tighter.

I wiggle my arms free to hug her back. "I promise if I bolt, you'll be the first person to hear about it. Mrs. Goldmann will be second. She said she's so upset we're leaving that she wants to adopt me."

The old woman who lives next door has been there for me my entire life. She was the one who put Band-Aids on my scrapes and cuts when I was growing up. She's been more of a mother to me than Elena ever has.

She taught me how to ride a bike and feed myself while my mother was off with a boyfriend. Mrs. Goldmann is the best goddamn babysitter in the world. And I wish she was my mom instead of the one fate stuck me with.

"She only wants you for your baking skills," Amanda jokes.

My laugh comes out as an unhappy sob. "I'll pay my way in cookies."

The future looms in front of me, unknown and scary. How bad can Churchill Bradley Academy be? If I stay under the radar and away from drama, once I graduate I will be able to make my own decisions.

CHAPTER 4

ELI

I lounge on my bed, knees bent, and my sketchbook propped against my legs, putting the finishing touches on the image I've created. My pencil moves rapidly across the paper, adding shading here, a harder line there as I soften the jaw and thicken the eyelashes.

Once I'm happy with it, I put the pencil between my lips and stare at the finished piece. Maybe it needs a little more blood. I tap the pencil against my teeth, pick up another red-colored one, and add a few red dots smearing the wooden cross the female demon is nailed to.

Better, but still not quite right.

A few more strokes and her face changes, becoming my new stepsister. I smirk. The platinum princess has no idea what she's walking into.

My cell chimes, and I toss the sketchbook onto the floor and reach for it.

Kellan: I'm back at CBA tomorrow. When are you coming?

Kellan is the only person I count as a friend. We started at Churchill Bradley Academy together and were assigned the same dorm room. He's my polar opposite. Funny, extroverted, *loud*. On paper we shouldn't be friends, but over the years, we've developed a weird friendship that consists mostly of us mocking everyone else in our classes and scaring the popular kids.

Me: Not tomorrow. Dad says I have to be a dutiful new stepbrother and bring the hag's plastic princess with me. Don't think they're getting here until later today.

Kellan: What's she like?

Me: Which one?

I roll off the bed.

Kellan: The daughter. I already know what your new mom looks like. She's hot for a hag.

I snort. He's been in trouble a few times at the academy for inappropriate comments to the female teachers. He likes men, too, but the male teachers rarely react to his flirting. He's, in his words, an equal opportunities lover.

Me: Don't even bother. She's buttoned up to her chin. Don't think I saw an inch of skin when I met her the other day.

Kellan: Is she hot at least?

Me: No idea.

I don't share the fact that I can remember the shape of her lips and the exact shade of blue her eyes are. They've only stuck in my head because I was so fucking furious with my dad for saddling me with an unwanted stepsister and stepmom.

"Eli?" My dad's voice breaks the silence. "We're home."

Great.

Me: Gotta go. The hag and her apprentice have arrived.

I throw open my bedroom door just in time to catch my dad with his fist raised, ready to knock.

"Oh good, you're home. Come down and say hello to Elena and Arabella."

"Why?"

"Because it's good manners. I thought we could go out for dinner tonight. As a family."

"I have things to do." The last thing I want to do is spend time in public with the stepbitch and her protégé.

"It's *one* night, Eli. I'd appreciate it if you would make an effort to welcome Arabella to our family. You're going back to school in a couple of days, so spend some time getting to know your new sister. She's nervous and worried about starting at Churchill Bradley. Maybe you could give her some pointers. Tell her what the place is like. Make her feel less alone."

How is that my problem? I don't say that out loud, though.

"Where are you planning to go? I assume somewhere expensive to satisfy your new trophy wife."

"Eli." My name is a sigh. "Can't you be happy for me?"

"If it was a real marriage, sure. But you're fooling yourself if you think she married you out of love." He still hasn't arranged for a post-nup. Thankfully, *my* trust fund is safe. Most of that money comes from my mom's side of the family, and it's all tied up and out of reach from the bleached-blond gold-digger and her spawn. Even if she divorces my dad, she'll only be entitled to part of his personal fortune, which is enough. But *my* inheritance from my mom is bigger and she will get no part of that.

I step out into the hallway, and pull the door closed behind me. "Where are they?"

"Downstairs. In the TV room."

I nod, reach into my pocket for my earbuds, and push them into my ears. I don't turn on my music, and we walk in silence through the house until we are outside the TV room. Voices, one loud—Elena—and the other softer, a lower pitch, which must be Arabella, come from inside.

I push the door open with the toe of my boot and walk in.

"I found him," my dad says from behind me. "*And* he's agreed to come out for our first family dinner tonight." He makes it sound like my decision is something to celebrate.

"Hello, *Mommy dearest*." I prop my shoulder against the doorframe and stare at her.

Her red lips are stretched into a smile, one that doesn't reach her crocodile eyes. "Oh, sweetie, you don't need to call me that. Elena is just fine. That's what Arabella calls me. Isn't it, darling?" She twists to search out her daughter.

I follow the direction of her gaze and find soft blue eyes focused on me. Arabella's lashes drop as soon as our eyes clash, shielding her expression. Her shoulders tense, and her head lowers so her hair falls across her face.

I smirk. She *really* doesn't like me. I already make her uncomfortable, and I haven't even tried yet.

I *like* that.

Maybe going out for dinner won't be a waste of time after all.

Maybe I can make her squirm for me.

CHAPTER 5

ARABELLA

My gaze skims over the yachts in the marina as we walk toward the restaurant. Everything looks perfect, from the boats bobbing gently on the water to the landscaping and dock. The people flowing in and out of the restaurant's entrance are all dressed elegantly, and I feel out of place in my jeans and pretty floral shirt.

Elena is hanging off Elliot's arm like he's her new accessory. To my right, Eli is keeping his distance, although I can feel the burn of his eyes on me from time to time. His earbuds seem to be a permanent fixture, and I wish I could shut out the world around me with so little concern for how impolite it is. He looks out of place, dressed all in black—jeans, hoodie, boots—and with his piercings and that padlock on a chain around his neck.

Why couldn't they just let me settle in on my first night?

I tried to make an excuse when my mother mentioned going out for dinner, but she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Elliot holds one of the restaurant doors open. "After you, ladies."

My mother walks in first, and I follow. "Thanks, Mr. Travers."

He chuckles. "Call me Elliot. You don't need to be so formal. Maybe, one day, you'll be comfortable enough to call me Dad."

There's no way in hell that's ever going to happen. He may be married to my mother, but that's it. Even using his first name leaves me feeling a little uncomfortable.

A maître d' greets us in the foyer. "Mr. Travers, I have your usual table prepared. If you'd like to follow me?"

Elliot smiles. "Thank you, Henry."

The place is small, intimate, and screams high class, from the quality of the furniture to the artwork on the walls. Each table is spaced a good distance apart, giving the diners enough privacy for them to hold conversations without being overheard. Keeping pace with the others, I can't help but notice the way we're being watched. On almost every face, there's recognition and a kind of poised eagerness at the sight of Mr. Travers and his son. Elliot smiles and nods to several other diners. Eli ignores them.

Our table is by a window overlooking a pretty garden, tucked away in a corner. Elena seats herself beside Elliot, leaving me stuck next to Eli. He takes out his earbuds, and drops on his seat, eyes on his phone.

I sink down into my chair, and freeze.

Why do I have four forks and three knives?

It's a stark reminder that this is not my world. I shouldn't be here. I'm used to mom-and-pop style restaurants with a warm, welcoming feel and comfort food. I'm not sophisticated or a socialite. I don't know anything about etiquette.

My hands tremble as I unfold the napkin and drape it across my lap. Eyeing the silverware for a second time, I try to guess the purpose of each one.

Main fork, spare fork? Salad fork? Butter knife? Meat knife? Vegetable knife? And then there's all the different spoons. You've got to be fucking kidding me.

The server appears beside our table, ready to take our order.

"Ooh, I think I'll start with the oysters," my mother coos, peering at her menu. "That's my absolute favorite. Followed by the organic Scottish salmon. Can we also have a bottle of your most expensive wine?"

I'm certain, at this point, the only reason we're here is because Elena wants to make sure all of Elliot's friends see us together. She's ready to play her part as a high-society wife, and she'll be looking to find people she can pick up all the gossip from.

I open my menu, and scan down the daunting selection of food on offer.

"I think I'm just going to skip the appetizer and have the pork chop with mushrooms, Bok Choy, and chilies. Can I also have fries with that and a bottle of spring water, please?"

"Are you sure about that, sweetheart?" Elena questions. "I don't think you need the carbs. Maybe a nice salad instead?"

A wave of warmth climbs up my throat and over my face. I'm pretty sure everyone at the tables around us can see the red spreading through my cheeks.

My smile is tight. "I'm happy with what I've picked. Thanks."

"I'll start with the oysters as well. Then California braised rabbit and a glass of mineral water since I'm driving." Elliot's attention moves from the menu to his son. "Eli?"

He doesn't look up from his phone. "Pork."

“You and Arabella have something in common already,” Elliot says as our server leaves.

Eli grunts. “It’s just food.”

“Eli’s also very interested in art.” Elliot directs the words at me. “Your mother told me you like drawing.”

I fidget with the napkin on my lap and smile back. “I hope to design my own clothing line one day.”

My mother laughs. “It’s good to have dreams, but you need talent as well.”

Her words sting. Not once has she shown interest in my designs.

They’re good. *Really* good.

I’ve had plenty of praise from my teachers, and although I shouldn’t care about Elena’s disinterest in my aspirations and ambitions, it still hurts.

I ignore her and turn to the boy sitting beside me. “Are you planning on being an artist?”

Those tempestuous green eyes flick up from his phone screen and lock with mine. His lip curls. “You don’t *plan* to be an artist. You either are or you’re not.”

I swallow, embarrassment coursing through me. “I mean in graphic design or something—”

“Why the fuck are you asking?”

“I’m just trying to be nice.”

“Don’t.”

“Eli.” His father’s voice holds a warning note.

Eli doesn’t acknowledge him but returns his attention to whatever is on his phone.

“Don’t worry, darling,” My mother pats her new husband’s arm. “It’s still so new for all of us. I’m sure it’s normal for kids to bicker.”

I reach for my wrist under the table and touch the friendship bracelet. The feel of the metal charms under my stroking fingers is enough to ground me. I just need to get through the next few days.

The server returns with our drinks, and Elena and Elliot fall into conversation. My mother is fawning over his every word, and it sets my teeth on edge. I tune out their chatter and sip my water.

Movement catches my eyes, and I turn my head just as Eli leans in toward me. He’s invading my space, so close I can see the curve of his dark

eyelashes, the sharpness of his cheekbones, the flash of his teeth as he sneers at me.

“Let me make something very clear to you. I have no fucking interest in being your friend. You are *not* family, and I don’t give a fuck about your happiness.”

My gaze drops to the ring piercing his lip, and the tip of his tongue darts out to flick the metal hoop.

“I’m not happy about our parents—”

“I don’t give a fuck how you feel. You are *not* part of this family. You are nothing more than the daughter of a gold-digger. Fucking dirt beneath my shoe.”

I flinch away from the anger in his whisper. “Eli, I—”

He leans closer, his breath fans my cheek. “If you push it, I won’t hesitate to make your place in this family clear to everyone.”

“And where’s that?” My heart is hammering against my ribs.

Eli doesn’t even blink. “With the rest of the trash. And, if that doesn’t get the message across, I will break you into pieces and leave you for the stray dogs to feed on.”

My stomach hollows out at the threat. My new stepbrother is a psychopath.

CHAPTER 6

ELI

Her face turns pale. I hold her gaze for a second longer, then settle back onto my chair, confident that she understands the message I'm sending.

"I need to use the restroom." Her voice is shaky as she pushes off her seat and stands. "Can someone tell me where it is?"

"Eli, take your sister so she doesn't get lost," Dad says into the ensuing silence.

"Stepsister." I point in the direction of the restroom but make no attempt to move. "It's over there."

"Eli!" My father nails me with a *look*, one that tells me I'm pushing the limits of public misbehavior he'll accept from me.

I stare right back at him. He's four years too late with the whole parental attitude. His eyes drop before mine do and my lip curls. I squash down the momentary surge of disappointment at the way he doesn't challenge me.

"Could you please show Arabella where the restroom is?" His tone is more placating this time.

Fucking pussy.

I shove to my feet and stalk away, not bothering to check whether the new *Princess of the Manor* is following me. I'm halfway across the restaurant before I slow my pace and, sure enough, she's trotting along behind me. When I stop, she crashes into my back and bounces off with a soft gasp.

"Sorry!"

I ignore her and lean against the wall, folding my arms. "Restroom is there." I jerk my chin to a black door. She darts a glance at it, then back at me. I don't move. Her tongue sweeps across her lips.

She doesn't believe me. Probably a wise decision, but on this occasion, I'm not lying. It really is the restroom.

"What are you waiting for? A fucking invitation? Someone to hold your hand? Public restrooms not good enough for you, Princess? Do you need a personal ass-wiper? Maybe some gold-plated toilet roll?"

She jumps at my barked words and hurries away. The door swings open under her palm, and she disappears inside. I reach for my cell, then

remember I left it on the table. I glance toward it and see my dad and his bitch with their heads close together as they talk. My gaze returns to the door in front of me, and my lips curve up as an idea comes to me.

Fuck it. Why not? Nothing wrong with making sure my message is really driven home.

I hum the chorus to 'Red Balloon' by Deal Casino, then walk inside. She's standing at the sink, hands clutching the edge and her head bowed as she breathes deeply. My eyes dip to her chest, where her breasts move against the cheap floral monstrosity. It's hard to gauge her shape beneath the clothes she's wearing. The baggy shirt doesn't hint at anything other than the swell of her breasts. I wonder idly if they're bigger than a handful. I wouldn't be surprised if they're as plastic as her mother's.

I move deeper into the room, check to see if the doors to any of the stalls are occupied, and then return to the entrance and shoot the lock. Leaning back against it, I wait for her to notice me.

When she finally lifts her head to see me reflected in the mirror, her lips part on a shocked little intake of breath. The sound makes my dick twitch. My jaw clenches and I fight to get control over my reaction. There's no reason for it, other than it's been a couple of months since I last fucked someone, and I was ready to go back to school and find a willing girl.

"Why are you in here?"

I push away from the door and cross to stand behind her. "I don't think I made myself absolutely clear at the table. You need to understand something."

I lean forward to rest my hands next to where hers are gripping the countertop, my arms trapping her in place. My chest presses against her back, and her warmth seeps through our shirts. Her perfume teases my senses, some sweet floral concoction that makes my lip curl in disgust. It reeks of purity, of innocence. Everything the girl in front of me isn't.

"Whatever you and your mother are planning, you're going to fail. You'll be out of our family within six months," I whisper into her ear. "You'll leave the same way you arrived. With nothing."

I press closer, driving her hips against the marble in front of her, and let her feel my erection against her ass. "Watch your six, dear *sister*, because I won't rest until you're gone. You'll either leave on your own two feet by car or on your back in a fucking box. I don't care which." I press my lips closer to her ear. "Fucking with my father is the biggest mistake your

mother could have made. Your life is about to become a waking nightmare. I hope you're ready."

My tongue licks over the edge of her ear and she shivers. Her eyes fly up to meet mine and I smile. If anything, her skin turns even paler. I push away and step backward, my eyes never leaving hers and our gazes stay locked through the mirror until I reach the door and unlock it. I slip out as quietly as I entered.

My dick is fucking hard as stone, her fragrance still in my nostrils. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to distract myself, otherwise I might be tempted to go back inside and fuck her in front of the mirror ... just to hear those little fearful gasps again.

My fingers curl, nails digging into my palms, as I fight against the temptation. I am *not* my father. I will not be distracted by pretty eyes and an innocent smile. She has a rotten core disguised by attractive wrapping, just like the woman who has my dad wrapped in her clutches.

I have control of myself by the time she comes out. Her eyes avoid me, and she walks straight past without even acknowledging my presence. I stalk along behind her, and we're back at the table just as the appetizers are being placed down. I didn't order one, so I grab a bread roll and pick at it. Arabella is quiet beside me, but I can feel the weight of her gaze every time she looks in my direction. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up with every glance. I ignore her, push my earbuds firmly into place and start my music.

'Head Like A Hole' by Nine Inch Nails fills my ears. I lean back on my chair and close my eyes, sketching an image of how she looked in the bathroom in my mind. The fear in her eyes, the way her lips were parted, a slight sheen coating them after she'd licked them. The white-knuckled grip she had on the countertop. The way she trembled at my threat.

Going back to school just got a whole lot more interesting.

The appetizers are followed by the main course, and I find myself watching Arabella as she tries to figure out what is the right set of silverware to use. I make a show of picking up a fork and knife, just to see if she's paying attention, and her sigh of relief lifts her breasts beneath the shirt.

I wonder what kind of underwear she wears. Is it as no-nonsense and unflattering as the clothes? Cotton, plain, full fitting? Or is she hiding lacy, barely-there panties beneath the thick fabric of her jeans?

I frown. *Why the fuck do I care what she's wearing?* All I'm interested in is getting her and her mother out of my life as quickly as possible.

Dessert follows the main course, and with it comes a second bottle of red wine. My new stepmother is loud, drawing the attention of the surrounding tables as she giggles and pats my dad's arm. Not even the music in my ears can drown her out.

I want to leave. There are too many people stopping by our table to speak to my dad and introduce themselves to the platinum Barbie twins. One or two try to speak to me. I look right through them until they falter to a stop and turn to the girl beside me. She's far more open to being questioned, and I drop a hand to my cell to turn down the volume on my music so I can hear what she's saying.

Her voice is hesitant, almost shy, as she explains how everything moved so fast and she needs time to adjust. I'm unable to stop a derisive snort and all eyes land on me.

"I need some air." I push to my feet and walk out.

Too many people, too many questions, too much noise. Ironic really, considering the music I have playing almost constantly in my ears. But that's a different kind of noise. It settles my mind and makes dealing with the outside world a little easier.

I reach the exit and step outside. There's a bench across the road, so I walk over to it and sit down, stretching my legs out in front of me, and pull my cell out of my pocket.

Me: Can you find out who my new stepsister is rooming with at CBA?

Kellan: I'll ask around tomorrow. Someone will know.

Me: Find out her timetable as well.

Kellan: What are you thinking?

Me: That she shouldn't get too comfortable.

CHAPTER 7

ARABELLA

My new spacious, white-walled bedroom is everything a girl could ever want, with a four-post bed, huge TV on the wall, and a walk-in closet. The few meager boxes that I haven't bothered to open barely take up any space in the center of the room. I have no intention of unpacking them. At least not the things I don't need. Before I leave for school, I'll pile them up in the back of the closet. There's no point getting comfortable when Elena has made sure I'm not going to stay. I feel more like a visitor than someone who is supposed to live here. Someone peering into Eli and Elliot's home while my mother makes herself comfortable in it.

I turn away from the corkboard I'm in the middle of decorating at a soft knock at my door to find Elena hovering in the doorway.

Her face lights up with a bright smile. "How are you settling in?"

"Fine." Swiveling my chair back to the desk, I place the postcard of Milan on the flat surface.

"What are you up to?"

"Making an inspirational board of my future."

And staying the hell out of Eli's way. After what happened in the restaurant, I've been avoiding him as much as possible.

"You want to travel?" Her voice moves closer.

I position the photo of the Eiffel tower on the cork and pin it in place. "I want to work in Italy someday, or Paris. Maybe New York to start with."

"Oh, Arabella. You only live once. Get your head out of the clouds."

Pressing my lips together, I glare at her. "What's wrong with having goals?"

"It sounds like too much effort." Elena laughs. "You need to start using your natural assets. Now *they'll* get you somewhere."

"My natural assets?"

She gestures at me with one hand. "You've got a pretty face. Decent boobs. Thank God you aren't flat-chested. We do need to do something with your hair, nails, and clothes before you leave for school, though."

"What's wrong with my clothes?"

“You live in yoga pants and hoodies. They aren’t sexy, and they certainly do nothing for your figure.”

I drop my hands into my lap and play with the hem of my t-shirt. “I’m happy with the way I dress. It’s comfortable.”

Elena’s lips turn down. “You’ll never get a boyfriend if you don’t put some effort into your appearance. Let’s go shopping!”

When I don’t reply, she pouts. “I’ll buy you some ice cream.”

I roll my eyes. “You can’t bribe me with that. I’m not six anymore.”

“We can get coffee instead, then. You drink that now, right?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say no, but a tiny part of me ignites with an eager delight that she finally wants to spend time with me. I can count on one hand the few times my mother has taken me out. Everything was left to Mrs. Goldmann when Elena left me for weeks on end in her care. Her neglect has been interspersed with moments of gifts and normality when she bothered to come home.

My protective walls cave. “Fine.”

We traipse back into the house hours later. Elena has two of the maids helping her carry the dozen bags she’s brought back. What I hoped would be a mother/daughter shopping trip turned into me watching her try on outfit after outfit. She bought dresses, shoes, and bags, and only at the last minute seemed to remember we were out to find me clothes. I spent thirty minutes in one shop, and the only thing I purchased was a pair of new sneakers.

I wince at the dull ache of the migraine behind my eyes.

Elena drops two of her bags onto an antique chair in the entrance hall. “Maybe you can borrow a few of the things I bought.”

“No, thanks.” I hide my pain behind a wall of indifference.

Flipping back her blonde hair, she pins me with a questioning stare. “We still had fun, right?”

My answering smile is tight. “Yeah, it was great.”

“When you’re on break from school, we can go shopping again.”

“Sure.” I turn toward the sweeping staircase, where Eli is observing us from the doorway to the entertainment room. He flicks his lip ring with his tongue, his eyes watching us with a burning intensity.

I ignore him and take the steps two at a time until I hit the upper landing. All I want is for my head to stop throbbing, and for the quiet of my

bedroom. Eyes half-closed, I kick off my sneakers, drop my bag on the floor, close the bedroom door, and throw myself face down on my bed.

Why had I expected Elena to be any different? She made me feel like an accessory while she flirted with the male store clerks.

Is it too much to ask for her to see me? Really see me. Not the girl she wants me to be. The younger version of herself, ready to make the same life choices and mistakes she did.

I am not Elena.

I am not my mother.

I shouldn't be starving for the attention of someone who barely gives it to me.

Yet even that truth whispered in my head doesn't stop my heart from hurting. I'm desperate for the connection we should have. The bond I've seen my friends share with their mothers.

Maybe it's me? Is there something wrong with me? Maybe I'm just unlovable, and that's why my mother acts the way she does. Could that be the reason our relationship is so fucked up?

I don't realize I'm crying until I taste the wetness on my lips. I reach for the pillow and drag it over my head to drown out the sound of my agonized sobs.

CHAPTER 8

ELI

I stand at my bedroom window and watch as Elena and Arabella climb into the little sports car. Their voices reach me, happy and excited—probably at the thought of spending my dad’s money—and anger unfurls in the pit of my stomach. It should be my *mother* in that car, not the money-hungry bitch and her daughter. Why did the platinum Barbie’s mom get to live in the house *my* mom spent years turning into a home? Why does she get to have *her* mom, while mine is rotting in the ground?

I wait until the car disappears down the drive, then turn away from the window. Time to find out what my new stepsister is all about. I’m confident they’re going to be out at the mall all day, and my dad is at work, so I don’t need to worry about being disturbed. I have hours to waste, and I know exactly what I’m going to do.

I leave my room and walk down the hallway to the one my dad has given to Arabella. The door is ajar, so I push it open and walk in. The smell inside hits me immediately. That same floral scent that was clinging to her skin at dinner last night. The memory of pinning her against the sink in the restroom at the restaurant wakes my dick up, and I scowl.

I’m *not* attracted to her. It’s her fear that turned me on, that’s all.

I kick the door shut and move deeper into the room and turn in a slow circle. There are boxes stacked neatly in one corner. She’s left the door to her closet open and there are three hoodies hanging up and those godawful yoga pants she seems to live in folded on a shelf. I turn to the dresser and pull open the top drawer. It’s full of underwear—bras and panties. Nothing exciting, all pretty plain. I don’t even bother rifling through them, shoving the drawer shut and opening the next. There’s barely anything else to be found. She either doesn’t have much in the way of clothes, or they’re all still packed.

I look at the bed. It’s neat and tidy, unlike mine, which I just crawl out of and leave. I don’t see the point in making my bed when I’m going to mess it up again later. But that’s not why I’m staring at it.

There’s something about this girl. Something that suggests she’s a diary keeper and I want it. I want to see what she hides behind her innocent

exterior.

Where would she hide it?

My gaze drops to the carpet. There's a small gap between the base of the bed and the floor. Big enough to slide a notebook beneath it, for sure. Lowering myself to my knees, I slide my hand beneath the bed, and—*bingo!* My fingers touch something hard. I flatten my hand on top of it and drag it out.

A pink and purple notebook with a little lock holding it closed. I can't stop an eye roll. I've never understood why people think locks on books work. It's literally paper and cardboard. A sharp yank and it's ripped away from the cover. I pick up the broken pieces of the lock and pocket them, then stand. Tucking the book beneath my arm, I walk out of her room and return to mine.

I have a lock on my door, which I twist as soon as I'm inside. I have some reading to do, and I don't want to be disturbed.

"Eli?" My dad's voice shatters the silence, and I look up from the diary. "Eli!" His voice is getting closer.

I swing off my bed and pull my nightstand away from the wall, place the diary behind it and then reposition it, before crossing the room and unlocking my door. I'm back on my bed when my dad knocks.

"It's open," I call out.

The door swings open, and he steps inside. "I need you to do something for me."

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry. I know you're not going to like this. I'd hoped to be able to take the day off work and drive you both to school tomorrow—"

"No." I don't need to hear the rest of the sentence to know what he's about to say.

"Eli." His sigh is heavy. "Can you please meet me halfway on this? I know you're punishing me for marrying Elena without telling you first. I understand that you're angry, but that's *my* fault, not hers. And certainly not her daughter's. It's going to be hard enough for Arabella to settle into a new school as it is. Add the fact that it's residential, *and* full of rich kids who have never had to struggle a day in their lives. She's going to need a friendly face."

"I'm not her friend."

“But you *could* be. You have so much in common.”

I snort.

“I need you to do this for me, Son. You complained about leaving your car here last semester. You can drive to school. That way, you have your car and won’t be stuck on site and reliant on Kellan the entire school year.”

I hate it when people use my wants against me. I couldn’t bring my car to school last semester because my dad insisted on driving me. That meant I was stuck on school grounds, aside from the times I went out with Kellan, and it drove me crazy. If I have my car, I can get away whenever I need to.

“Fine. But if she’s not ready when I want to leave, she can find her own way.”

He’s unable to hide the relief in his voice. “Thank you, Son. I’m sure if you give her a chance—”

“No.” I reach for my earbuds, making it clear that the conversation is over. He stays in the doorway for a second longer before nodding and walking out, and pulls the door shut behind him.

CHAPTER 9

ARABELLA

The first thing I see when I step into the dining room is my mother curled on a chair in nothing but a white satin dressing gown that's hanging off one shoulder. Her face looks puffy and bloated, the redness of her eyes adding to her disheveled hungover appearance.

Thank God I'm escaping today. After the disastrous shopping trip with her yesterday, I spent the rest of the evening in my room pretending to unpack. All I've been able to think about is what Eli said to me at the restaurant. The hate dripping off his words left me cold. I can't forget the way he pinned me against the sink in the restroom. The way his muscled body caged mine, the tension that radiated between us, or the fact I could feel him through his jeans.

I don't blame him for his anger. He's right. My mother *is* a gold-digger, ready to strip his dad of every cent he has. Elena thinks she's entitled to what everyone else has. But I'm not going to be forced to pay for her sins. Eli may intimidate me here, but that doesn't mean he will at school. I'm not going to let him bully me.

I join Elena at the table and snatch up a piece of toast from the rack. "You need to get dressed. We have to leave in thirty minutes."

She squints at me over the rim of her coffee cup. "Eli is driving you both to the academy this morning."

I freeze in the middle of reaching for the butter, my appetite evaporating. "You have to be fucking joking."

"Sweetie, it's a four-hour drive, and he has a car. You don't really think I have the time to drop you off and then come back, do you?"

I suck in a frustrated breath at the thought of being stuck in a confined space with Eli for that long. "What about Elliot?"

"He's gone to the office." She takes a sip of coffee.

I grab a granola bar from the counter and stash it in my backpack with a bottle of water. I doubt the Prince of Darkness is going to stop for anything on the way, so at least I'll have a snack.

As if I've somehow conjured him up with the thought, Eli appears in the doorway. "I'm leaving in five minutes. If your stuff isn't in the car by then,

it's staying here."

"Gee, thanks," I call after him as he walks away.

"Play nice with your brother." Elena murmurs.

"*Stepbrother*." I correct, not bothering to spare her a glance.

I hurry after Eli into the hallway.

My two small cases are standing where I left them. Pulling up the handles, I wheel them through the front door, down the steps, and onto the driveway. Eli is already sitting behind the wheel of an expensive-looking black sports car.

I eye the back of it before opening the passenger door. "Where are my cases supposed to go?"

Impatience glitters in his gaze when he turns toward me. "Back seat, and don't scratch the paint. This Bugatti is worth more than you are."

I fight not to roll my eyes. Somehow, I manage to get the seat up and my cases situated, then settle into the passenger seat. I close the door and place my backpack by my feet. I've barely got my seatbelt clicked into place before Eli roars off down the drive.

"Slow down!"

"What's the matter, Princess? Don't you like fast cars? I'd have thought fast cars and even faster men were exactly your speed." The taunt rolls off his tongue.

He's baiting me, but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of reacting to the dumb nickname. "I'd just like to get to school in one piece."

"You will, if you stop whining like a bitch."

It's on the tip of my tongue to argue back, but it's a four-hour drive, and I don't need to talk to this asshole. A tense silence descends in the confines of the car.

I find my phone and push my earbuds into my ears, then swipe my fingers over the screen and set my playlist on a loop. The crooning voice of the lead singer of Skillet fills my head with the lyrics of 'Finish Line.'

If he can ignore me, then I can ignore him too. I duck my chin down, close my eyes, and lose myself in the music. The tension slowly unwinds from my muscles, and I loosen my clenched jaw. My breathing slows, and my mind drifts. Tiredness sweeps over me, the exhaustion of not sleeping properly since my mother turned my life upside down.

A jolt jerks me back into consciousness.

Shit! When did I fall asleep?

I rub my eyes, glancing around in confusion. Why have we stopped?

“What are you doing?”

Has he been creeping on me the whole drive while I’ve been unconscious? The idea of Eli Travers watching me sleeping leaves me unsettled.

He’s resting his forearms on the steering wheel, staring at me. “Get out.”

I pop out one earbud, and tiny shivers ripple through me at the dark smile on his face.

“What?”

“*Get out.*”

I scan the scenery outside the window. “But we’re miles from anywhere.”

His jaw tightens, and his head turns to stare out of the window. “Get out, or I’ll drag you out by your fucking hair.”

When I don’t move, he unclips his seatbelt and reaches for the door handle. Alarm rips through me, and I scramble to undo my own. I snatch up my backpack, throw open the door, and climb out.

“Eli, please don’t do this.”

He tosses my two suitcases out of the back and onto the road. “School is approximately two miles in that direction.” He points along the road.

I grab his arm as he steps away. “You can’t just leave me in the middle of nowhere.” My voice is shrill.

His attention shifts to my hand. In two strides, he has me pinned against the car. I let go of him, in favor of pushing at his chest, but it does nothing to stop him crowding close. His hands secure my arms as I try to struggle away from him. When I realize there’s no escape, I stare up at his angry face.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want. This is *my* world you’re stepping into. You aren’t in Hicksville anymore. You’re so way out of your depth; you have no idea.” He picks up a lock of my hair and rubs it between his fingers. “Welcome to day one of your life at Churchill Bradley Academy, Princess.”

My body shakes, shock turning to rage. “Don’t pull this bullshit on me.”

He wants me to fear him, and I *do*, but I refuse to let him see it and give him that power over me.

He’s so close I can smell the mint on his breath, feel his warmth, and the hardness of his dick through his jeans. He’s just a pervert who gets off on frightening people.

Our gazes hold and clash. His eyes bore into mine, hard as flint, without an ounce of mercy. After a few seconds, I waver, and lower my eyes.

He pushes off me the moment I drop eye-contact and walks back to the driver's side of the car. "Enjoy the walk." He swings into the car and slams the door.

I peel myself away from the side of the car, and kick at his back tire. "You son of a bitch."

I should have seen this shit coming.

He spins the wheel, kicking up a cloud of dirt before taking off along the road at high speed. I curse him under my breath.

When I dig my phone out of my pocket, and check the cell reception, my heart sinks.

No signal.

I shove it away again, and ball my hands into fists, watching the car until it's out of sight. I can't stop shaking, and it's hard to inhale through the tightness in my throat. Tears of fury threaten to spill from my eyes, but I blink them back.

I hate him.

CHAPTER 10

ELI

The fact she's fallen asleep in my car, without a care in the world after the threats I made at the restaurant, pisses me off. The closer we get to the school, the more my jaw clenches and I throw her angry glances, until fury bubbles beneath my skin and I slam on the brakes to throw her out.

Even then, she fights me, defiance pouring from her until I corral her against the side of my car and let her feel how hard she's making my dick. The spark in her eyes falters, and she drops her gaze from mine.

Good. But you're too late because now you're fucking walking.

I might have let her convince me to allow her back in my car if she hadn't put up such a fight, but she did, so fuck her. My gaze stays on her retreating form in the reflection of my mirror until she's out of sight.

I lied about the academy being two miles. It's closer to one, but it serves her fucking right. She can walk it and discover what happens when she's not on time for her scheduled arrival.

Kellan is sitting on the steps leading up to the main doors when I drive past and turn into the student parking lot. People jump out of my way when I show no sign of slowing down, and I eventually find my favorite parking spot, next to Kellan's car, and cut off the engine.

Less than a minute later, my passenger door opens and Kellan climbs in. He leans over the seat to look in the back. "Where's your new sister?"

"*Step-fucking-sister.*" I give him a tight smile. "Dropped her off a mile down the road. Stupid bitch fell asleep on the drive."

"The gates lock in ten minutes."

I shrug. "Not my problem." I unclip my seatbelt and throw open the door. "Did you figure out who she's rooming with?"

"Not yet."

"Fuck's sake, Kell. Do I have to do everything myself?"

"My, someone is snappy today." Unfortunately, my snarling and snapping doesn't bother Kellan. He's not scared of me at all. "Just wait until she moves in, then you'll have your answer."

I shake my head and get out of the car. People stop talking as I walk past them. I ignore them. Kellan jogs to keep up with me.

“What’s the hurry?”

“I want to get inside.” I take the steps to the main doors two at a time.

No one greets me. No one waves. Everyone just stares ... Well, until I meet their gazes. Then they suddenly discover they have something else to look at. I’m okay with that. I’m not one of the popular kids. I’m not a jock. I don’t belong with the emos, or the nerds, or any other group that gravitates toward each other. None of them associate with me. There’s me ... and there’s Kellan. Our own little clique, which sits outside of all the others. And that suits me just fine.

I don’t slow my pace until I’m at the door to the room I share with Kellan. I swing my head to look at him. “Key?”

He places it into my waiting palm, and I unlock the door and walk in. The tension leaves my shoulders as soon as the door closes behind me, and I throw back my head and suck in a deep breath.

This is my sanctuary, my space. Even more so than my bedroom at home. No one ventures in here without an invitation. And those are *never* given out. I toss my bag onto the bed and turn to face my friend.

“I want you to be the one to meet her when she arrives. Show her a friendly face, and help her with her bags.”

He frowns. “I thought we—”

“We will, but first, I want her to get comfortable.” My lips curl up. “And then the game will begin.”

“But I don’t know what she looks like.”

I drop onto my bed and stretch out, tucking my hands behind my head, and I smile at the ceiling. “She looks like a fucking angel. All blonde hair, big eyes, and virgin vibes.” I roll my head sideways. “But don’t let that pretty outer shell fool you. Beneath the beauty, she’s as ugly as her mother.”

My finger taps play on my music, and I drown out whatever Kellan is going to say with the sound of ‘Nails’ by Call Me Karizma.

He stares at me for a moment longer, then turns and leaves the room. I know he’ll do what I tell him. Kellan enjoys getting inside people’s heads as much as I do. It’s why we’re friends.

He’s the only friend you’ve got.

I tune out the voice in my head and close my eyes. I don’t need any other friends.

I must have fallen asleep because when I next open my eyes, the room is in darkness. I’m not surprised. I rarely sleep at home. And it’s been three

months since I was last here. My body is going to want to catch up on the rest I missed. My music must have stopped hours ago. The only sound in the room is Kellan snoring.

I twist onto my side, wait for my eyes to adjust, and then sit up. Bending down, I rummage through my bag for my sketchbook, tear out a sheet of paper, scrunch it into a ball and throw it at Kellan's head.

He yelps. "What the fuck?"

"Wake up, asshole. Tell me what happened."

"When?" He yawns. "Oh, with Arabella, you mean?"

"No, the fucking Wicked Witch of the West. Yes, Arabella!"

"It rained on her. Poor thing was soaked through when she finally got here. Looked like a drowned rat." He snickers. "She's up on the third floor."

"With ..."

He shrugs, yawning. "Dunno. The room was empty when she got there."

"Why the fuck is it so hard to find out who her roommate is?"

"Does it matter? It doesn't change the plan. They're all fucking scared of you anyway."

I purse my lips. "True." I stand so I can strip out of my clothes, tossing them into a pile as I peel each layer off.

Kellan rolls onto his side, head propped on his hand as he watches me. "Exciting. First strip tease of the semester."

I roll my eyes. I don't swing that way, and he knows it. I also don't care if he sees me naked. He's seen the scars on my back a thousand times before and knows where they came from.

"Seriously, though." The playful tone drops from his voice. "Why are you really so hellbent on fucking the girl over? It's not her fault your dad married her mom."

"Sins of the mother ..." I pull my shirt over my head, "... are paid for by the children."

CHAPTER 11

ARABELLA

“And this is the cafeteria.” Lacy, my new roommate, gestures through the open doors of the bustling hall.

Hands shoved deep in the pockets of my favorite purple hoodie, I shadow her inside. She has a smile for everyone we pass, her self-confidence drawing others like butterflies to a flower. The second she entered our dorm room, she lit up the place with friendliness and endless conversation.

Chattering students crowd the tables, and the décor is plain. The aroma of food is appealing but does nothing to settle the nerves in my stomach.

“We also have plenty of vending machines in the halls if you just need snacks.” Chestnut hair in sleek waves around her beautiful face, Lacy turns her bright blue eyes to meet mine.

I offer her a friendly smile. “Thanks for giving me this tour.”

After Eli dumped me out of his car and left me to walk the rest of the way to school in the pouring rain, I’d been ready to cry. I had to explain to the campus security at the locked gates why I was late. Thankfully I was able to talk them into letting me inside.

Lacy touches my shoulder, dragging me back from my thoughts. “I’m just going to say hi to someone. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Standing awkwardly by an empty table, I watch her run over to hug a group of laughing girls.

“Morning, Arabella.”

The voice close to my ear makes me jump, and I swivel to confront its owner. “Kellan.”

Gray eyes flick over my face. “Lacy is your roommate?”

“She turned up about ten minutes after you left. Thanks again for helping me with my cases yesterday and getting me to my dorm room.”

His lips curve at the corners. “Anytime.”

He weaves his way past the tables, other students scattering in his wake when he doesn’t slow or try to walk around them.

Odd.

A hand grabs my arm, and I’m pulled into Lacy’s side. “A word of advice. Stay away from Kellan.”

My eyebrows knit together. “Why?”

“He hangs out with Eli Travers.”

“*Eli?*”

Lacy tilts her head to the side, lips pursing. “You know him?”

“He’s my stepbrother.” If I lie, the truth will probably come back to bite me later. “We only met a few days ago, and he hates me.”

“Holy shit! You know he’s a freak, right? And not your standard freak or weirdo. Eli Travers is a *monster*.”

My stomach twists. “What do you mean?”

“He pulled a knife on one of the boys in his art class and threatened to slice up his face just for touching his bag.”

“What happened?”

“Security took Eli’s weapon, and he got his off-site privileges revoked for a month, but the other boy still managed to wind up with three broken fingers. He said it was an accident but wouldn’t tell anyone who had done it. We all know it was Travers, and that isn’t the only thing that’s happened we’ve linked to him. There have been fires started around the campus. People have had their dorm rooms trashed—”

“Hey, baby.”

A male voice interrupts us, and we’re surrounded by three boys.

“Brad,” Lacy greets the blond one with a giggle.

He wraps his arm around her waist, and smiles, white teeth flashing in his tanned, handsome face. “You going to introduce us to your friend?”

“Arabella is my new roommate.” She turns my way. “This is Brad Shaw, my boyfriend. Evan Ridley, and Jace Black” She points at each one as she names them. “Rising stars of the school’s football team.”

I clear my throat nervously. “Hi.”

The word is barely out of my mouth when the crowd around us falls silent.

Eli. I know it must be him before I even look to check.

He’s standing in the doorway of the cafeteria, dressed in his usual black. Earbuds in, his head is down as he fiddles with his phone.

My lips part, tongue sweeping over them. His eyes lift and fix on mine. Heart hammering, I feel oddly exposed as his gaze sweeps over me. It only lasts a split second before he breaks the connection and moves across the room to join Kellan at his table.

Jace tracks my stepbrother's movements. "I've heard Travers is into some really weird shit. I'm talking about dead animals and satanic rituals."

Brad hums softly. "If you know any virgins on campus, let them know it's time to give that status up, or they'll end up as one of his sacrifices."

Lacy elbows him in the chest. "That's not funny."

"You're safe in that department. Unless he's into blood drinking now." Burying his face in her neck, he makes her squeal.

Jace and Evan burst into laughter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Eli and Kellan watching us from their corner, matching smiles on their lips. How much am I willing to bet he knows exactly where my dorm room is now, thanks to Kellan?

Fuck.

What are the chances I'll even run into him outside the classes we share? I'll stay in my new bubble and keep out of his way.

Jace grins at me. "So, do you know any virgins, Arabella?"

Lacy pulls a face. "Oh my god! Shut up and leave her alone."

"What? I'm trying to save her life here."

"You mean get in her panties," Evan snickers.

"Come on, Arabella, I'll finish showing you around." Untangling herself from her boyfriend's arms, Lacy grabs my hand and tugs me away from them.

I wait until we're out in the hallway before asking her the question burning on my tongue. "Why didn't you tell them about my connection to Eli?"

My new roommate shrugs. "Gossip is like wildfire in this place, and the longer no one knows about your connection, the better. It will give you a chance to be seen for yourself, and not as the *Stepsister of the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy*."

CHAPTER 12

ELI

I lean back on the seat and prop my feet up on the table, not even pretending I'm not watching her. She's sitting with her back to me, but every so often her head turns just enough to see where I am.

She disappeared out of the cafeteria earlier with Lacy Truman—the always-smiling popular girlfriend of Brad Shaw, dimwitted jock—presumably to finish her tour of the grounds, but was back within thirty minutes to grab lunch before we all had to troop into the assembly hall for the yearly welcome back speech from the principal.

“You know they're all talking about you, don't you?” Kellan says in a low tone beside me.

I don't remove my gaze from Arabella's back. “Of course, I do.”

It's what they've always done. I can't recall a time when they *didn't* talk about me, whisper behind my back, and avoid attracting my attention. Even before my mom died, I'd been the outsider, the oddity. The difference was after her death, I stopped giving a fuck. They've all forgotten the Eli Travers who came before. The one who had two happy parents. The one who was a misfit because he struggled to connect with people. All they know is the Eli Travers who came after. The one who no longer cared to try and fit in, who didn't give a single fuck about social niceties. The one who would happily watch the entire world fucking burn just to feel the heat from the flames.

Across the room, Lacy laughs and places a hand on Arabella's arm. I shove to my feet, reach down for my bag, and set off toward the door, taking care to hit my new stepsister in the shoulder with my bag as I pass.

“Fucking rude,” Brad mutters and I stop.

The entire cafeteria holds its breath as I turn to face the football captain. I lift an eyebrow. “Got something to say?”

The jock blanches but holds my gaze. “Just saying it was rude to knock into her like that without an apology.”

“It's okay.” Arabella's voice trembles and my eyes shift to her.

My lip curls up at one corner. “Why the fuck would I apologize when I'm not fucking sorry?”

“Because it’s good manners.”

I cock my head and return my attention to Brad. “Did someone grow a pair of balls over the summer?”

He shifts on his seat, eyes dropping briefly before lifting again to meet mine. “I’m just saying ...”

My smile widens. So do his eyes. “It’s the first day of a new school year. Is this really how you want it to begin? Think carefully and get back to me.”

I turn and walk out. Kellan catches up to me just as I’m running a finger along the wooden paneling in the boys’ restroom. I ignore him until I hear the soft click and the panel slides open. I duck down and climb inside. He follows me, pushing the hidden door back into place. The secret tunnel is too low to be able to stand up straight, and we crouch down to move along it until we reach a corner where it widens out. Kellan moves up so he’s beside me and we continue in silence until we reach the end. I step back and let him find the hidden latch. He sits and drops through the gap. I toss my bag through and then land beside him and straighten.

The secret passage comes out on the edge of the old cemetery. The school’s main building used to be a large manor, built by an English Lord when he immigrated over one hundred years ago. At some point, it had become too expensive to maintain by his descendants, who ran out of money and sold it off. Twenty years ago, it was turned into a school—Churchill Bradley Academy, named after Lord Churchill Bradley, himself.

The place is full of secret tunnels. I’m not sure how many people know about them, but I have never seen evidence of anyone else using them.

“We have to be back in thirty minutes,” Kellan says, brushing a hand over his thigh.

“I want to go to the tomb first and make sure nothing has been touched.”

He nods and we set off across the grass.

The tomb is on the far edge of the cemetery, in a grove of trees. There’s a small archway leading inside. It’s overgrown and unkempt. I could have cleaned it up, but that would make it easy to access for anyone, and that doesn’t suit my purposes. I like having it as a place that only we have access to.

There’s a smaller tomb in the center of the graveyard, which has been used in dares over the years ... but this one? This one is ours.

There are five steps cut into the dirt leading down to the metal doors and I walk toward them, pulling a key out of my pocket as I go. It had been in the lock when we first discovered the place during our first year at CBA. Kellan had been attempting to run away, and I'd been looking for a place to hide.

Neither of us are the same kids who arrived at the academy ... friendless and scared.

There is a solid thud as the key turns the lock, and I push open the door to walk inside. My eyes scan the interior, looking for anything unusual, but it looks exactly how it did when we left at the beginning of summer.

I move deeper inside and run my fingers across the marble coffin set in the center. "We're back, Churchill. Have you missed us?"

Kellan snickers behind me. I place my bag onto the coffin and pull out my sketchpad. Flipping it open, I sit down and turn the pages.

"Is that Arabella?" Kellan flicks a finger at the girl I've drawn nailed to the cross.

"Might be."

"Are we going to recreate it?"

I lift one shoulder. "You think we should nail her to a cross?"

"Have you already seen her naked?" His finger strokes over the breasts of the girl in the drawing.

"Not yet. But I have a good eye." I smirk. "And I went through her closet before she packed to come here." I pull out another book. I've replaced the lock on her diary with a fresh one, just for appearances. "I know all her secrets."

Kellan reaches for the book. "Is that her diary?"

I toss it to him. "Mostly boring. Lots of '*woe is me*' prose, but there are a couple of things in there that surprised me. Read it. I've highlighted my favorite parts."

CHAPTER 13

ARABELLA

Where the hell is my diary? Rooting through the books I'd thrown in my locker before Lacy took me on a tour of the school, I don't spy the pink and purple cover with a silver padlock. I'm sure I packed it with my sketch pads, but it was missing from my case when I opened it. The thought of anyone finding it fills me with dread. Even with the lock, it's pretty simple to get into.

Jesus, what if Elena finds it?

I try to visualize where it could be. It contains my innermost thoughts. I'm not comfortable with the idea of someone finding it and reading it. I've poured my heart into it. Scribbled my feelings down when I had no other outlet, letting my emotions bleed onto the pages. Then there were other things buried among the pages. Vivid dreams, and fantasies I'm ashamed to think about when the sun is up.

Lacy appears beside me and leans against the locker next to mine. "Watch yourself around Mr. Drake. He likes the female students a little too much."

My eyes flit to the teacher in question. He's standing by the main hall door, watching the throng of young people passing him by. "That's gross. He's old enough to be someone's grandfather."

"Some girls go for mature and experienced."

"They need to get their heads checked."

Lacy laughs. "So, what's your type, roomie?"

I close my locker. "Why? I hope you're not planning on setting me up."

She falls into step with me. "Jace likes you."

Fingers curling around one of the straps of my backpack, I squeeze it tight, my thoughts still on my diary. "We spoke for less than a minute."

"I saw him giving you flirty looks."

I roll my eyes. "All I want to do is focus on studying and surviving the year."

"It would be fun to hang out together. We could double date."

"I've barely been here twenty-four hours. I'm not interested in hooking up with anyone."

We flow into the assembly hall with the other students. I'm hyper-aware of Eli and Kellan to the right of me in the mass of pupils taking seats. I don't even realize I'm touching the friendship bracelet on my wrist until I feel the cold metal of the charms under the pads of my fingers. A four-leaf clover for luck, a red heart representing my best friend, and a blue butterfly to remind me one day I'll be able to fly away.

Lacy finds us seats with Brad, Jace, and Evan. As I slip off my backpack and flop down beside her, I don't miss the way Jace eyes me. I'm not about to encourage him. I've never had time for a boyfriend between school and running the house while my mother was always away. I'm not sure I need one now. I already have enough to worry about.

A new school.

New teachers.

Trying to figure out where I belong in the scheme of things.

A whole host of fears and doubts go hand in hand with it all.

Eli's head turns and he looks at me. I don't like the gleam in his eye. The silent promise to wreck me into irreparable pieces.

The principal's voice booms out from the microphone on the stage at the front of the hall, but I barely catch the words. My shoulders tense, guard going up, and I duck my head, refusing to meet my stepbrother's stare.

Lacy's earlier comment echoes in my head. Gossip is like wildfire in this place, and the longer no one knows about your connection, the better. It will give you a chance to be seen for yourself, and not as the *Stepsister of the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy*.

How long before people find out? Will Eli tell everyone about our connection?

A burst of excited whispers ripples around us.

I latch onto one word. "What was that about a dare?"

Lacy leans close. "It happens every semester. Anonymous dares appear in lockers. No one knows who sends them, but it's been happening for years."

"What kind of dares?"

"Setting off fire alarms, climbing on the roof, filling one of the teacher's drawers with erasers. Things like that."

My fingers curl around the charm of the butterfly hanging from my wrists, and I cradle it gently in my palm. "It sounds juvenile."

“Most of it is harmless fun, but you don’t want to ignore it.” Seriousness coats her voice.

“Why?”

“Because bad things happen to those who do.” Her words hang between us, mysterious and ominous.

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CHAPTER 14

ELI

Principal Warren gives the same speech he has given every year I've been at CBA. He welcomes all the new students, talks about the rules we have to live under, mentions when we're allowed off the grounds and then finally raises the only thing anyone in the room is interested in.

The Dare.

"I say this every single semester, and for the most part, you listen, but we have a lot of new students, so the rest of you will understand why I need to repeat it. For many years, there's been a game played at Churchill Bradley. A dangerous game. If *anyone* receives a dare in their locker, you must report it immediately. Do *not* engage in the game. Find a member of staff."

Excited whispers echo around the hall. I peer down at my hands. The black polish covering my nails is chipped and I pick at it, peeling it away while Warren's voice drones on.

"Dinner is served between five and seven in the evening, breakfast from six-thirty until eight-thirty in the morning, and lunch between twelve and two. The cafeteria also opens from eight until nine-thirty in the evenings for supper and snacks. Curfew is at nine-forty-five and lights-out at ten. Be at your first class at nine am tomorrow, ready to start a new semester at Churchill Bradley Academy. The rest of the day is your own, but please don't leave the school grounds."

The kids around me stand and file out, whispering about the dare and whether they would be the ones to find the little folded note in their locker sometime in the next week.

I wait until the hall is mostly empty before standing.

"Mr. Travers." Principal Warren steps in front of me. "How are you? I hear your father remarried during the summer break. Please give him my congratulations when you next speak to him."

I lift my eyes to meet his, and his smile fades. "Alright, well ... no late night tonight, and I'll expect to see you bright and early, and ready to learn, in class tomorrow."

He turns and walks away. I head in the opposite direction, out the door and up the stairs to my room. No one stops me, but I can feel their eyes

following me as I pass them in the hallway. Kellan is already in our room when I get there, sprawled out on his bed. He lifts his head when I walk in.

“Word is your new sister is lined up to be Jace Black’s next conquest.”

“Not my sister.” I pull open the mini-refrigerator and take out a bottle of Coke.

“Close enough.”

I toss the cap from the bottle at his head. “She won’t be here long enough to form any relationships.”

“What if she isn’t the one to get the dare? She’s not the only new kid this semester.”

“She’ll be the one.” I say the words with the utmost confidence. I *know* she will be the one, because I know something no one else in the school knows. I know where the dares come from.

Kellan sits up and spins around to put his feet on the floor. “So, what’s the plan?”

I take a swallow of Coke, set down the bottle and face him. “We’ll see what the first dare is. It’s bound to be something stupid. It usually is. I don’t even know why people get so excited over it.”

“Because people have died.”

I snort. “Coincidence and rumor. No one ever died from filling a teacher’s desk with condoms.”

“No, they died from *not* doing it.”

“Name one person who refused to do the dare and then died,” I challenged.

Kellan stares at me. There is one person. But he knows if her name leaves his lips, I’ll lose my shit. My eyes narrow. His lips part and he’s going to fucking say her name. I *know* he is.

“She didn’t die because of the dare,” I snap before he can speak. “You know it. I know it.”

“No, I don’t.”

I spin away. “I’m not talking about it.” My stomach twists. I can’t even let her name form in my mind. I stalk over to the window and throw it open so I can lean out and suck in a lungful of cool air.

Other than Kellan, she’d been my only friend. *There*, I admitted it. Kellan is my only friend. My only fucking connection in this fucking hellhole.

Whose fault is that?

I dismiss that thought. I did what I had to do to survive. It made me a pariah, universally feared by students and teachers alike. I am fine with that.

“Eli ...” There is a tone to Kellan’s voice that makes me turn and face him. “Why are you really going after Arabella?”

My lips curl up into their customary sneer. “I told you. She’s paying for the sins of her mother. If it’s too much for you, say so. I’ll do it myself.” It has nothing to do with the fact that just the merest hint of her perfume has me hard as a rock. Absolutely nothing to do with how her smile twists my insides.

It has everything to do with the fact she exploded into my world, my family, with her mother and expects me to behave like they both belong there.

He frowns. “No, I’m all in, you know that. I just ... she seems nice, that’s all.”

“What the fuck would you know?” I snatch up my sketchbook and drop onto my bed, flipping through the pages until I find a blank one. Reaching into my backpack, I pull out my pencil case.

Kellan doesn’t speak, but I can feel his eyes on me as I stare down at the paper.

“I’m all in, Eli.” He repeats the words, and I nod without looking up, my pencil flying over the sheet as I start a new drawing.

CHAPTER 15

ARABELLA

I keep pace with Lacy as we leave our dorm building. “You said bad things happen to people who don’t do the dares. Like what?”

“People have had their lockers vanish for the entire year,” she tells me as we cut across the neatly manicured grass. “One boy had all his hair fall out, and it never grew back. Someone else came out with a rash that spread all over their body.”

“They don’t sound so bad.”

“These were before my time, but the stories were passed down.”

“They could just be rumors.”

Lacy stops to face me. “Arabella, the dares are no joke.”

I shrug. “I just find it hard to believe things like that can happen.”

“Why do you think the faculty have asked us all to report in when we get a dare?” She gestures across toward the main part of the school. “No one will, of course. No one wants anything to happen to them.”

“Has anything happened to someone you actually know?”

She pauses for a beat before answering. “Zoey, my roommate last year, received one and ignored it.” Sadness turns her lips down.

“What happened to her?”

Lacy’s shoulders sag. “She was found the next day in the old cemetery with a head injury. She never woke up, and died.”

My mouth dries up. “Jesus. Did someone attack her?”

She blinks fast, tears filling her eyes. “That’s what the faculty believe and why they tightened security around campus this year. The thing is, Zoey had no reason to be in the cemetery that night. She knew never to go there alone.”

I gently touch her shoulder. I don’t know her well enough to offer a hug. “Maybe she was meeting a boy?”

She sucks in a deep breath, and sighs. “Zoey wasn’t into guys. Do not take the dare lightly.”

She turns away from me and starts walking. I take the hint that the conversation is over and follow her. Day one at Churchill Bradley Academy, and it isn’t turning out how I imagined. Something dark lurks

beneath the perfect exterior. We're in the middle of nowhere, and maybe it isn't as safe as I expected.

We pass the tennis court, and head for the football field. Brad, Jace, and Evan are hanging out behind the bleachers with a group of other students.

When we reach them, Lacy steps into the haven of Brad's open arms.

He drops a kiss onto her forehead. "Everything okay?"

She gives him a bright smile, her earlier grief lingering in her eyes. "Yes."

"Who's your new friend?" One of the other boys asks.

"This is Arabella. My roommate." She introduces me to the group. "Kevin, Miles, Garrett, and Bret are on the swim team. Tina, Maggie, and Linda are cheerleaders."

Tina gives me a cool once-over. "Where are you from, Arabella?"

"Michigan," I reply. I can already see her judging me, my clothes, my hair. The desire to escape is strong, but I keep my feet planted on the ground. I hate being the center of attention and shift uncomfortably as they continue to stare at me.

"Do you cheer?" Maggie asks.

"No."

"What *do* you do?"

I fidget with the zipper of my hoodie, I shrug. "Study, mostly."

Jace smiles from where he's leaning against one of the metal posts of the bleachers. "Hey, Arabella."

I blurt out the first thing that enters my head. "Are there any good places to go for a run?"

The boy named Miles points to our right. "There's the running track or the woods, but security will be out here once it gets dark to chase us back to our rooms."

Evan huffs. "It's so fucking lame."

"They're only keeping us safe from old Churchill Bradley." Brad's gaze roams around the group.

Shaking my head when Evan offers me a cigarette, I frown. "Who?"

"Lord Churchill Bradley. The guy who had this place built." Lacy's boyfriend explains. "They say he went mad and killed himself out there in the woods. His restless spirit roams the grounds at night, looking for the living to suck out their souls. On the nights when the moon is full, you can hear him howling in the cemetery."

No one can hear you scream.

Every horror movie Amanda made me sit through fills my head with disturbing clarity. We're just a bunch of unwitting teenagers waiting to get slaughtered.

Gloved hands grip my throat. Eyes closed, I squirm against the body pinning mine, the edge of his mask caressing my cheek.

I shake off the disquieting fragments of imagery from my dreams.

Evan grins. "You scared, new girl?"

I shake my head. "Not of ghosts. Lacy, I'm going to head back to our room. I think I've heard enough stories for today."

She smiles at me from Brad's embrace. "I'll catch you later."

Jace pushes off the metal post. "I'll walk with you."

"I know the way." I turn to retrace my steps.

"I just want to make sure you get there safely." He jogs over the grass to catch up to me.

Sighing, I wait for him to catch up. "It's broad daylight. Ghosts only come out at night."

"Some monsters aren't afraid of the light."

I give him a side-eyed glance. "I'm guessing that's a reference to Eli Travers. I have no intention of going anywhere near him."

Jace drags me to a stop beside him. "Arabella, he aimed straight for you when he knocked into you in the cafeteria. You're on that freak's radar already, and it never ends well for anyone who is."

I shake off his hold. "Thanks for the heads up."

"It's safer if you hang out with us."

"By us, you mean you?"

The corners of his mouth curve in a smile. "Am I really that obvious?"

"I'm not looking for a boyfriend."

"Why not?"

"I've barely been here five minutes. I need to find my feet before I think about things like relationships."

Capturing my wrist, he tightens his fingers around it. "How about just friends for now?"

He smiles down at me, hazel eyes warm.

Jace is sweet, and damn it, he's giving me puppy dog eyes. It's a welcome change after all of Eli's hostility toward me.

The shield of resistance around me wavers. "Friends."

He grins, revealing a dimple on his cheek, as he clasps my hand in his.
“Let’s get back to your building.”

“I’m pretty sure friends don’t hold hands.”

“Then we’ll be friends with benefits—”

I twist my hand in his grip, trying to get free. “Jace—”

“The benefit of holding hands,” he teases, towing me along beside him.

“What’s the matter, Michigan? You’re not into touching?”

When we reach the dorm building, I untangle my fingers from his.

“Thanks for the company.”

Jace pushes his hand through his hair. “Anytime. I’ll see you later.”

Inside my room, I change into a pair of sweatpants and a pink t-shirt.
Then I tug my sneakers back on.

I need a run. Need to clear my head and the edgy energy that’s been thrumming through me since I got here.

I grab my earbuds from the drawer of my bedside table and push them into my ears. Selecting a playlist, I click on the first song and move toward the door to the sound of Adam Lambert singing ‘Runnin.’

CHAPTER 16

ELI

I pull up my hood and step outside. There's an hour before curfew starts and I'm full of restless energy. If I don't burn it off before we're confined to the building, I won't sleep. My plan is to take a run through the woods, circuit the cemetery and then come back. It's a path I've taken more than once over the years. No one else uses it, preferring the track around the outside of the football field.

I tap play on my phone, and 'Been Caught Stealing' by Jane's Addiction fills my ears. I set off, my sneakers pounding against the ground as I jog toward the trees.

I'm five songs into my run when I see a flash of pink on my left. My pace slows as I turn my head to search through the trees.

Is someone else out here?

Most people stick to the public areas and don't venture out into the woods surrounding the school. Too many rumors, scary stories, and legends. I'm pretty sure most of them are made up by the teachers just to keep the students where they can be seen.

When I don't see anything more, I set off again, skirting the edge of the cemetery, following the path around it, which would lead back to the school. I see that flash of color again just as I'm passing the cemetery's arched gateway. I stop, my eyes tracking the blonde as she jogs on a path parallel to the one I'm using. Carefully, I step back until I'm close to the gates. The path she's on will curve a few feet from where I'm standing and merge together. My lips curve up. Maybe it's a sign. A hint that it's time to put my plan into action.

I pull the hood further over my face and roll my sleeves down until they cover my hands. By the time I'm done she's almost in front of me. Her eyes are focused ahead, and she doesn't notice where I'm standing in the shadows. I wait until the first verse of '.SALT.' by Dead Poet's Society has finished, tap stop on my music app, and then set off after her.

My gaze doesn't stray from her back, and I concentrate on her movements as she jogs along the path. When she begins to slow, her head swinging left and right, I duck down at the side of the path. She doesn't

stop, but her jog becomes a slow walk as she looks around, then she shrugs and gives a little laugh before running again.

I reach down and scoop up a handful of stones. Taking aim, I toss them into the trees ahead of her. They clatter as they hit and she skids to a stop, twisting to look in the direction of the noise. I stay where I am, hidden in the shadows cast by the setting sun. I can hear her breathing, fast and heavy, and a thrill burns through my blood at the evidence of her fear.

She sets off again, once she's convinced herself no one is in the trees, and I wait until she's out of sight before returning to the path. I jog at a slower pace, not wanting her to see that I've been behind her all this time and, by the time I reach the wood's edge, she's heading back up the steps to the main doors of the dorm building.

I don't go back inside straight away. Instead, I do a cool down stretch of my arms and legs, and then take a slow walk around the cluster of buildings that house the dorm rooms for the various years. I can hear voices talking, and bursts of laughter, all of which fade when I turn the corner and the small group of students spot me.

I walk past them, not sparing any of them a glance, but I can hear their whispers as they share the things they've heard about me. I wonder which rumor will take precedence this year, and how I can use it to my advantage. It'll be interesting to see what they come up with.

Last year I was a murderer, and it was covered up by the principal. The year before that, I was an arsonist. Before that, I experimented on animals. Only one of the rumors holds any hint of truth, and even that one isn't accurate.

"Hey, Travers!"

I don't recognize the voice, so I ignore it and keep walking.

"Shh, don't attract his attention." A girl's voice chastises the original speaker.

"Why not? He's just a kid, like the rest of us."

My lips twist. *A kid*. I stopped being a kid when I turned fourteen. Sometimes I feel ancient, like I've lived a thousand lifetimes.

"Is it true you crucified a cat?"

And there it is.

I turn slowly and let my gaze track over the small group clustered together, staring at me. There are two faces I recognize. The rest all look fresh-faced, young, and fucking terrified. The two girls clutch at the guys,

and the guys try to hide how much they wish one of them hadn't called my name.

I don't answer the question. I just smile and lift a finger to my lips, then wink. One step, two, a third, and I'm directly in front of them. They're on the edge of flight. All it will take is ...

I lean forward. "Run," I whisper ... and they do.

The girls squeal, grab the hands of the boys closest to them and bolt. The remaining three stare at me, at each other, and then dash after their friends.

I watch them go, then turn back and continue my walk, whistling quietly beneath my breath.

The room I share with Kellan is empty when I get there, so I grab my towel, a change of clothes and take a shower. Each of the dorm rooms has its own bathroom. Our parents pay for the best, so no communal shower areas for any of us. Even the cafeteria is manned by quality chefs you'd be more likely to find in restaurants.

And thinking about food, it must almost be time for the evening meal menu. Hopefully, Kellan will be back by the time I'm out of the shower and we can head down to eat. I can go alone, but I've been stared at enough for one day.

CHAPTER 17

ARABELLA

Kneeling on my bed, I pull the first photograph out of my folder and stick it to the wall. I'm trying to distract myself from the jumpiness that's clung to me since my run the other day. After hearing about my scare, Lacy and Jace insisted it was probably just a rabbit, and I was letting Brad's words about Churchill Bradley's ghost get to me. Their words haven't done much to soothe my nerves. But I can admit, to myself at least, that after the stories about the dares and ghosts, I guess it left me a little spooked.

Amanda's face grins up at me from the image I've pinned to the wall, her eyes twinkling with happiness as she hugs me tightly. It was taken only a few weeks before I left.

Why does it feel like it's been an eternity since then? With everything that's been happening, I haven't had a moment to really stop and think. Now with the silence of my empty dorm room around me, emotions rush in.

I miss my best friend.

She was someone to confide in. Someone who understood what I was feeling.

Home is gone.

Homesickness washes over me in a deep clinging wave. I know that I'm longing for a place that's no longer there. A past that part of me naïvely believed would never change. But it's hard not to. I'm alone, away from everything I've ever known.

It has become quickly apparent that I don't have anything in common with Lacy and her cheerleading friends. She's tried to talk me into trying out for the team, but it's something that doesn't interest me.

There's a little voice in the back of my head telling me I'm not good enough to be here. I'm not one of them. They live in a different world where they've never had to worry about where their next meal is coming from or if they can afford a new pair of shoes.

I feel lost. Adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces, and I don't know what to do.

I reach for the next photo, glancing over at Lacy's side of the room. She's already adorned her wall with photos, inspirational quotes, and postcards.

Her perfect little life set out for everyone to see. I shouldn't feel jealous, but I do.

Abandoning what I'm doing, I twist around on the bed with my knees pulled up to my chest and stare at the wall. I toy with the tiny heart charm dangling from my bracelet and wonder what my best friend is doing right now.

We haven't texted in a few days.

We used to text constantly.

Now that's all changed.

I need a sense of normality. The sound of a safe and familiar voice to shake me out of the doubts and darkness inside my head. I snatch my phone up off the mattress and hit dial on her number.

She answers on the fourth ring. "Hey, Bella! How are you?"

Chattering voices are distinct in the background, and it makes me wonder where she is. Our favorite pizza place? The bookshop?

The tension melts from my body at the sound of her voice. "Just thought I'd call and check in. It feels like forever since we talked."

"I'm glad you called. I've got some news. Do you remember Darren?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, listening closely, trying to picture where she is. "The shy, tall guy that you have a crush on and is head of the chess club?"

Amanda squeals. "We're dating!"

"That's fantastic."

"I know, right?" She laughs. "He's so sweet. We've been hanging out a lot, and we're into a lot of the same things."

She chatters happily, and I'm torn between wishing I was there and feeling left out. What did I expect? That everything in my old life would come to a crashing halt? That nothing would be able to continue on without me.

"How's it going at the academy?" Her question snaps me out of my self-pity.

"Good." I force the words out, not wanting to ruin her cheerfulness with my doom and gloom.

"Have you made any friends?"

"My roommate and a few other students she knows," I lie.

"What about your stepbrother?" Her voice drops to a whisper.

"I've been avoiding him. Everyone here is scared of him. I've heard about things he's supposed to have done. If it's true, I'm surprised he hasn't

been expelled.”

“Your stepdad has money and influence. I’m sure he’s paid a lot to make sure Eli keeps his place there.”

“That makes sense.” I wonder what it would take to get Eli removed from the academy permanently.

“Oh, Darren is here.” She giggles down the line.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at Tri-slice, sitting at our old table.”

My heart clenches at her use of the word *old*. “Enjoy your pizza.”

She laughs at something Darren says, but it’s not loud enough for me to hear. “We will. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay. Bye.” Lowering the phone from my ear, I sit quietly with it cradled in my curled fingers.

She’s busy. She’ll call back later to tell me about her day, I tell myself. Or maybe a text in a couple of days. She won’t forget me.

The positive words spill on and on inside my head, but they’re tainted with doubt.

The last anchor of security shifts inside me. Not as heavy and solid as it had once been. In the back of my mind, I can already feel it slipping away.

My gaze lingers on the photos on Lacy’s wall. Maybe it’s better to be a part of a crowd, even if I don’t fit in.

CHAPTER 18

ELI

The first week at the start of a new school year always follows the same pattern. For the first couple of days, classes are disrupted as new faces turn up in the wrong rooms as they try, and fail, to follow the map they've been issued.

After the third time of the door opening and an embarrassed face looking around, Mr. Gerard sighs and sets down his textbook.

"I think we might need to add orienteering to the Freshman timetable this year. What do you think, class?"

Everyone laughs. The kid at the door turns beetroot red. Across the room, I see Arabella toss the boy a sympathetic smile. It doesn't help. He turns even redder from the attention of a senior. The laughter gets louder.

"You're turning him on, Michigan." Jace leans across to nudge her.

It's her turn to flush. "Don't be mean. I just know how it feels to be the new kid and not know anything."

I roll my eyes. Always with the fake act of caring. I've met her mother. I know how little she gives a fuck. I've read the dark thoughts in her diary. The things she dreams about. The twisted thoughts she has. At some point, this act of hers is going to shatter ... and I'm going to be the one to break it. Show everyone the ugliness that hides inside, just waiting to come out.

I ignore how the darkness she hides calls to mine. She wants things I didn't expect. Things I want to give her. To punish her, of course. Not for any other reason. No matter how my dick feels about the things she shared on the pages.

I spin the pen between my fingers. If things follow the same pattern as every other year, the first dare should arrive in the next forty-eight hours. It always drops during the first week of school, usually a day or two before the weekend. I'm confident it'll be her locker it ends up in. She's the only new senior to join the school this year. I've yet to hear about any new kid in lower years receiving a dare. It's always existing students or new seniors. My theory is that the people behind it will want to see what kind of person she is. If she'll step up to the challenge or cower and go and report it to the principal.

I think she'll take it. I've read her diary. She puts on a great act of being sweet, of being a rule-follower, but I've seen her innermost thoughts, and that's all it is ... an act.

My dick stirs, thinking of some of the things I've read. The things she thinks about when she's alone in her room. I lean back on my seat, the end of the pen tapping against my lips, and it's only when blue eyes meet mine, widen and dart away that I realize I'm still staring at her.

Her eyes snap back to mine and, instead of looking away, I let my gaze drift over her face, drop to her lips and my tongue comes out to sweep across mine, pausing to toy with my lip ring. *Her* lips part, eyes widening. I point my pen at her, then slide it across my throat. The threat is clear, and yet, she doesn't lower her gaze from mine.

The classroom around the pair of us fades into a muted noise as we hold a silent battle of wills. One she loses when her lashes drop, shielding her eyes. I smirk and turn back to face the front of the class, just in time for the bell to signal the end of the class.

We don't share any classes for the rest of the day, and I only catch a brief glimpse of her during lunch break before she's surrounded by her new friends. Kellan drops onto the seat opposite me, effectively blocking my view.

He shoves a tray of food across the table to me. "One day you'll line up for food like the rest of us mere mortals." His tone is amused, and there's a slight curl to his lips.

We both know I won't.

"Do you think she's received the dare yet?" He picks up a fry, swirls it in mayonnaise and pops it into his mouth.

I shake my head in disgust. "You're such a fucking heathen. Eat your food like a human being."

"*I'm* the heathen? I've seen your sketchbook, Eli. You're more of a monster than I am."

"A monster with table manners."

He snorts a laugh.

"And no, I don't think she has." I address his original question. "I think they'll time it for the weekend. That gives more access to everywhere without the teachers getting in the way." I've studied the patterns of the dares. As much as I can anyway. People don't always admit to receiving

one. But for those who have ... Thursdays and Fridays have been the most popular days, with the dares being carried out over the weekend.

"You know if she talks to anyone about it, she'll realize it's a once-and-done."

"She won't. You've read her diary. Once she knows the rules of the dare, she'll keep it to herself." My lip curls. "She's a good girl."

"Did we read the same diary?" Kellan arches an eyebrow.

My grin is all teeth. "I didn't say what she was good at. Publicly, she wants people to see and acknowledge her as a good girl, someone who does as they're told, and follows the rules. Privately, well, it's clear that she wants to be a *really good girl* for other reasons."

She thinks she knows what she wants. Her diary entries talk about dark desires, but I don't think she's strong enough. Not really. She'll break. She's weak. She proved that when she panicked during her run the other day.

I lick my lips. Stalking her through the woods has woken something up inside me. I want to do it again. I want to hear her frightened breaths. I want to see her chest moving rapidly with the frantic beat of her heart. I want to *hunt* her, and trap her, and ...

No, you don't. You want to drive her from the school. You already have the dares worked out. Scare her away. Send her back to her mother. Ruin their plans.

But I could have a little fun with her first ... right?

Laughter reaches my ears, soft and feminine, and my eyes scan the room looking for its owner. Blonde hair shining beneath the artificial light, head thrown back as she laughs at something someone at her table has said, she looks gloriously carefree and happy.

For a second, my heart stutters, my dick swells, and doubt clouds my mind. I throw my shoulders back and squash down the surge of desire. It's all a lie. She's fake. In it with her mother to take as much money as possible from my family. She might have everyone else fooled, but not me.

I shove my food away, my appetite gone.

"Not gonna eat that?" Kellan reaches for my burger.

I wave a hand. "Have at it. I'm going for a run."

CHAPTER 19

ARABELLA

“Bella, are you going for a run before dinner?” Jace asks.

My first impulse at seeing him in the cafeteria at lunch was to avoid him, but somehow, he and Evan ended up at my table. In the two days since I arrived, they’ve been hanging out with me constantly.

“That’s my plan.” I peel the wrapper off the Hershey’s cookies ‘n’ cream bar and nibble on a piece.

“I’ll meet you outside the dorms.” Jace nudges his shoulder into mine. “I need the exercise.”

“You going to get lost in the woods with Michigan?” Evan chuckles, wiggling his eyebrows at us.

Jace tosses a bread roll at his friend’s face. “You’re just jealous that none of the girls like you.”

My gaze involuntarily seeks out my stepbrother. Eli and Kellan are at a table on their own. Both of them have ignored me, much to my relief. I’ve been able to settle into the rhythm of a routine and find my feet.

I study Eli’s profile, his messy hair, those dark curving eyelashes, and his slashing cheekbones. My exploring drops to the padlock on its chain around his neck. Tongue flicking out, he plays with his lip ring as he talks with Kellan.

How can someone so terrible be so obscenely handsome? The thought hits me out of nowhere, and I recoil. *Why the hell did I just think that?* I do not think Eli Travers is handsome. He’s cold, twisted, and sick as fuck.

“You need to stop staring at them.” Jace’s breath tickles my ear.

“I’m not,” I lie, shifting my attention to another table.

He arches a brow. “Then how come I was watching you do it a second ago?”

“I don’t care what the Prince of Darkness and his minion are doing,” I snap, angry at getting caught.

“*Prince of Darkness*. That’s a good one.” Even though I’m not looking at him, I can hear Evan’s smirk. “Travers is a screwup. He’s going to live on his trust fund until he ends up in jail or goes out in a fireball of flames in his Bugatti.”

The bell rings.

Around us, the other students grab their bags and start to scatter. Lacy weaves her way toward us from where she's been chatting with the cheerleader squad. Dumping her bag on the edge of the table, she rummages around before pulling out a packet of gum. She offers me the next one.

"We've got Mr. Bellamy for English."

Evan groans. "Make sure you don't leave anything on your desk at the end of class. He's a klepto always stealing students' shit."

"Where's Brad?" Jace asks, rising from his chair at the same time I get up.

"Miles needed help with something. He said he'd meet us in class ..."

Her voice trails off as Eli and Kellan pass us.

"Assholes," Evan mutters under his breath.

Kellan must have heard him because he turns a hard-eyed look in his direction. If looks could kill, Evan would be dead right now.

Lacy waits until they're gone to speak again. "Come on. I don't want to be late."

The second bell rings, and we hurry to class. My desk is at the back of the room by the window. Lacy and Brad are in the middle, with Evan toward the front and Jace at the table next to mine. Eli and Kellan are off to my right, tucked away in the corner.

Eli eyes me across the room for a lingering moment, one eyebrow arching up when I make the mistake of peeking his way.

I ignore the clench of my stomach muscles. It's as though I'm waiting on the edge of a razor blade. Waiting for the truth to come out. I keep expecting Kellan to leap up and tell everyone who I am. Maybe I should just do it myself, like ripping off a Band-Aid. Nausea rolls through me.

Get your shit together, Gray. You can't let paranoia win. It's going to hover over you like a specter. This is what they want.

Jace makes eye contact with me and spends half the class giving me goofy eyes, trying to make me laugh. By the time it's over, I'm feeling a little more relaxed.

On my way out of the door, I pause at his table. "Thanks."

He gives me a half-smile. "I like seeing you smile. It's far more pretty than you looking like terrorized prey about to be eaten by a predator. I get it, though. Travers scares pretty much everyone."

Oh, you have no idea.

The thought that he might hate me when he learns I'm Eli's stepsister leaves a heavy weight in my chest. Lacy might still like me, but I doubt others will be so nice.

"I'll catch you for that run later?"

Not if I go running early.

I don't reply and slip past him with the other students, and head down to my locker.

I'm in the process of opening my bag to slide some books inside when something white catches my eye. I reach in to pluck it up. A note folded in half. I hold it up to the light. The paper feels thick between the pads of my fingers, expensive. I tilt my head and unfold it. Words printed in elegant black handwriting leap up at me off the page.

Replace the coffee beans with frozen peas in the cafeteria.

Holy shit. Is this a dare?

I cast a quick look around, scanning the sea of faces. No one is watching me. There's no one lurking around. The crowd surges through the hallway, and my backpack feels heavy on my shoulders.

Fingers curled around the note, I keep it scrunched in my fist. I dump the rest of the books in my locker, close it and hastily make for outside.

I exit the building, setting off in a random direction, the piece of paper still curled in my hot, sweaty fist. I keep walking as I unfold the crumpled piece of paper.

Replace the coffee beans with frozen peas in the cafeteria.

Am I going to do it? From what Lacy told me, everyone else does. Why did they pick me? Who issues the dares?

I stare down at the message as if it has some hidden answers.

Maybe I should just hand it in to one of the teachers? What if someone finds out. What will they think if I don't go along with the dare?

CHAPTER 20

ELI

The rest of the week passes without incident. Arabella is clearly avoiding me, other than a couple of sneaky glances during class, after our eye-war the other day. That suits me. It puts me out of her mind and means when I finally make my move, she won't be expecting it.

I haven't avoided her, though. I've just been careful to make sure she doesn't notice me. I've tracked her movements and noted her patterns. Followed her like a creepy fucking stalker, according to Kellan, anyway. But there's a reason behind it. I need to know her routine.

She goes for a run every evening before dinner but has avoided the path which goes through the woods since the first day. I make a note to figure out a way to get her to redirect her route. I want her back in the woods, where I can turn her into a rabbit for my inner wolf to hunt. That's something for later, though. First, I need to hook her attention and start the game.

Friday evenings are social evenings at Churchill Bradley. The school makes sure there are events, dances, parties, game nights, and other clubs available. It's all done to ensure we don't leave the grounds, and for the most part, it works. If everything is available, students are too lazy to leave. But there's an added excitement to the air tonight. The first week of school is complete and no one has heard of a dare being issued. Anticipation is a heavy weight, and students talk in hushed whispers while they ease open their lockers, only to hide their disappointment when they don't find a thick parchment sheet folded into a small square on top of their books.

I spend part of the evening in the tomb, sketching. It's quiet, and I can relax there without needing music in my ears to drown out the noise around me. Kellan will come and get me at some point. He's far more sociable than I am and enjoys being around other people, even when he makes them nervous. Maybe that's part of the appeal. I've never bothered to ask him.

"Eli?" Right on schedule, Kellan slips through the door and crosses over to where I'm sitting cross-legged with my back propped against the coffin holding Lord Churchill Bradley.

I glance up at him. “You know, in all the years we’ve been coming here, we’ve never opened the coffin and said hi to the lord.”

His eyes go to the coffin, then back to me. “You want to open it?”

“I do. It shouldn’t be difficult between the two of us.”

“Why?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I’m curious if he’s really inside, or whether it’s just a really fancy memorial piece.” I rise to my feet and turn in a circle to study the entire tomb. “Do you think the tomb is soundproofed?”

My gaze returns to the coffin, and we stare at it.

“Can we even get it open?” Kellan breaks the silence.

“I think so. We might have to chip away at it. I doubt it’s been moved since they interred him.”

“We’ll need tools.”

“We can get them from maintenance.” A smile tips my lips up. “We’ll need to clean up any mess, though. I don’t want my pet project hurting herself, if I decide to bring her here.”

“Speaking of which.” He turns to face me. “I think she got the dare. I was standing near the lockers when she opened hers. Something inside scared her. I didn’t see it, but she definitely took something out and kept it in her palm.”

Satisfaction coursed through me. The waiting is finally over. It’s time to begin.

“Did she tell anyone?” I close my sketchbook and return it to my bag.

“I didn’t see her talk to anyone. She shot out of the building like her ass was on fire.” He pulls a drink out of his bag and hands it to me. “Are you serious about the coffin?” He jerks his chin toward the white marble at my back.

“I want to look inside. Aren’t you interested to see if there’s any truth to the rumors about him being buried with his wife and pets?”

His head tilts as he looks at the coffin. “I’m not sure that many things would fit inside it. Anyway, the story is he haunts the place looking for his wife, so I doubt she was buried with him.”

I smirk. “Maybe *he* was buried with her ... *alive*.”

We trade glances, then laugh. Neither of us believes in ghosts or any of the stories about the place being haunted.

“Do you think they’ll let us have a Halloween party this year?”

My good mood fades. Last Halloween resulted in the death of a girl I'd considered as close a friend as Kellan.

"They will. I think they'll want to throw a party to remove the memory of what happened last year." My voice is carefully controlled, nothing of my inner rage over Zoey's death showing, but Kellan knows. It's there in his eyes. He knows because he feels the same way.

"Maybe you should leave Arabella alone and concentrate on—"

"I can do both." I drain the can and crush it in my fist. "Let's get out of here."

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CHAPTER 21

ARABELLA

Reaching for my phone on the nightstand, I brush my thumb over the surface, illuminating the screen. I stare at the time. Two a.m.

The piece of paper with the dare written on it is under my pillow, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. No one knows I received it. There's been something a little thrilling about keeping it all to myself. Only me and whoever put it in my locker knows I have it, and I haven't been able to figure out who it is.

Lacy is snoring softly on the other side of the room in her bed, and neither of us has an alarm set as it's Saturday morning.

Still clutching my phone, I flick back the cover and slip off my mattress, scurrying in the direction of the bathroom. I close the door behind me, switch on the light and move to the sink. I study my reflection in the mirror. There are worry lines between my brow and my eyes are clouded with uncertainty.

Do I do the dare? It's just a dumb prank, that's all. How many people really go through with them?

It's just a bit of harmless fun. And no one will know it's me.

Biting my lip, I press down into the fleshy softness hard until it hurts.

What if I get caught? What if something goes wrong?

No one is going to get hurt. That insidious little voice continues. Annoyed, maybe, but that's all. And I won't get caught if I'm careful.

I meet the eyes staring back at me in the mirror. There's a glimmer of recklessness that hasn't been there before.

I've always been a good girl. A straight-A student, studying hard and never stepping out of line. I've never broken the rules or stayed out past curfew.

Who am I trying to please? Why am I acting so perfect? What has it gotten me? Do the dare. That little spark of darkness whispers. What have I got to lose? Elena expects only failure from me, no matter what I do. Eli hates me, even though he knows nothing about me. Elliot only stuck me here because it's what my mother wanted.

Pressure builds in my head, and I close my eyes, hating that inner voice and its barbs of truth. A valve has uncapped within me, and bad things are spilling out.

Why am I making such a big deal out of this? It's only frozen peas.

I clutch the porcelain sides of the sink and huff out an unsteady breath. Uncertainty wavers, melting into resolve and acceptance.

I return to the bedroom and use the light on my phone to grab my running gear and tug it on. Tiptoeing to the door, I sneak outside, carrying my sneakers. The second I'm in the hallway, the light automatically flicks on. I freeze, heart in my mouth, and listen, the sound of my own breathing harsh to my ears.

Silence.

My shoulders sag.

Satisfied there's no one around, I shove my sneakers onto my feet and jog quietly along the hall. The sky is still black when I venture outside, not yet softening with the light of dawn. I stick close to the buildings, staying in the shadows, away from the security lights dotted along the paths. Nothing stirs. An eerie quiet shrouds the campus, transforming it into a dark and ominous place.

This is such a stupid idea. Please God, don't let me run into campus security.

Heart pounding like a trapped bird in my chest, I sneak through the grounds, jumping at every tiny noise or movement.

I am not going to chicken out.

By the time I reach the cafeteria, my nerves are a chaotic, jumbled mess, and I'm being driven by adrenaline. My hands are shaking as I enter the building. I pull my phone out of my pocket, and switch on the flashlight mode. I dart past the empty tables and chairs. The faint smell of bleach and cleaning products linger in the air.

The kitchen is spotless and tidy, everything labeled and neat. I spy the stainless-steel coffee container to my left. Searching through the cabinet underneath, I find a plastic Tupperware tub. I pop off the lid, grab the coffee, open it and pour the contents into the pot. My hands are shaking so badly that I end up spilling some.

"Shit." Somehow, I manage to get the rest of the coffee into its new home. Sealing the lid, I return it to the cabinet where I found it. I snatch a couple of paper napkins from a roll and wipe up the granules.

A thin beam of light slices through the darkness through one of the windows.

Heartbeat tripling in speed, I seize my phone and duck down behind the counter.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The word chants in my head as I hold my breath.

Do not freak out. Do not freak out.

A door creaks open, but I don't hear any footsteps.

I'm hyper-aware of everything. Every tiny sound. The hum of the refrigerator, and the aroma of the coffee I spilled on the counter. Closing my eyes, I will my breathing to slow.

Seconds tick by, and it feels like an eternity before the door closes.

Another minute passes before I rise, peeking out across the cafeteria.

I can't see anyone. It must have been security on their rounds. I need to hurry.

Scrunching the coffee-filled napkins into balls, I dump them in the trash can. The big white freezer is at the back of the kitchen. It's the walk-in type with a thick metal door. I open it. A blast of cold air washes over me, and I shiver. I push it all the way, wait to see if it closes, but it doesn't swing back as I fear. Still conscious of the chance of getting locked inside, I rest a huge sack of potatoes against the door.

A bag of sealed frozen peas is on the second shelf down on the rack nearest to the door. The cold of the plastic burns into my fingers as I carry it back to the counter. A handful of the iced green globes bounce out to roll onto the floor as I fill the coffee container. Snapping the lid shut, I slide it back into position.

I'm giggling like an idiot as I stow the peas in the freezer and close everything up again. I'm not about to waste time searching for the peas on the floor. I keep the light from my phone downward toward the floor, tearing through the cafeteria toward the main doors.

The security guard is long gone, but that doesn't stop me from racing through the campus to my building. Panting, sweating, and my limbs shaking, I wind my way back to my dorm room.

Lacy is still snoring when I arrive.

I ease off my sneakers, and crawl under the blanket on my bed, still fully dressed. Breath whooshing out of my lungs, I quiver, sick to my stomach as the adrenaline rush finally ebbs.

I can't deny the excitement of completing my dare.

There'd been no worries about grades or my reputation. No thought of Elena, Elliot, or Eli.

For one brief moment, I'd felt alive.

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CHAPTER 22

ELI

The cafeteria is in an uproar. *Someone*, and I have a good idea who, has replaced the coffee beans with peas. A childish prank. A dare issued and accepted. A signal that the game is about to begin.

I can barely keep the smile from my face as I watch the chef waving his arms around, complaining loudly to the chief of security, demanding to know why the culprit hasn't been caught. The guy hasn't got an answer. It's not like anywhere gets locked at night. Not any of the communal areas, anyway. And why would they? We use them all the time and once dinner has been served and cleared up, there's nothing to find in here. But the chief of security lets the chef rant until he runs out of steam, promises to investigate and leaves. I catch his smile as he reaches the door, and guess he was told to pay little attention to the cafeteria over the weekend once the dare had been issued.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only one who sees the pattern surrounding the dares. If I'm the only one who cared to find out where they came from in the first place. But for the first time, I'm glad they haven't. Because I can use it to my advantage.

There's a coffee mug and two slices of toast waiting for me when I reach the table where Kellan sits.

"Frozen peas." His laugh is dry. "Not the most original dare. She didn't even hide the coffee beans well. Staff found them within five minutes of discovering the switch."

"But perfect for what's about to come." I pull the mug toward me and inhale the aroma before taking a sip. "If it had been something more dangerous, she would have caved." I am sure of that.

Kellan glances around and lowers his voice. "What's the next step?"

I reach into my pocket and take out a small, folded piece of paper. I hold it out to him. "When you get a chance, slip this into her locker. *Don't* let anyone see you."

"What does it say?"

My smile stretches wide. "Just praising her for a job well done, and her instructions on how to reply to messages."

His eyebrows shoot up. “*Reply?*”

“We need to know she’s going to accept the dares, so I’ve given her a way to show her acceptance.”

“And what’s that?”

I lean back in my chair and lift my mug. “You’ll see.”

Weekends are free for students to mostly do as they please, but there are clubs available for those who want them. The art studio is also open for use, and after breakfast that’s where I head. I need to find something to do; otherwise, I’ll be haunting the hallway where the seniors’ lockers are, waiting for Arabella to find my note.

As it is, my plan to lose myself to art is disrupted the second I walk into the room and find the girl in question already in there. For half a second, I consider turning and walking out, but I change my mind and cross the room to take the easel opposite her. I know she’s seen me when her hand stops moving on the page. I ignore her and reach for a sheet of paper, clip it to the easel and turn to study the various paints, pencils, and pens. Pencil is my favorite medium to use, but sometimes I dabble in paint, so I squeeze colors onto a palette, select four different brushes and place them on the table to my left.

I know what I want to design today, but my eyes keep straying to where the blonde works quietly on the other side of the room. I want her to leave, check her locker, and find my note. I need to know whether she’s going to accept my challenge.

What if she doesn’t?

Then I’ll have to rethink my plan. It’s not the only way I can get rid of her. It’s just easier.

Easier? You think what you’re planning is easy?

Maybe not. Maybe easy was the wrong word. More *entertaining*, then. More *interesting*. More *daring*.

I want to take her down to her base parts, and strip everything away until only the core reality remains. I want to see how long it takes to break her.

My hand moves over the sheet of paper without thought, my concentration on the girl and not the image taking shape in front of me. When she stops to reach back and rub the small of her back, my eyes follow the movement of her shirt as it strains against her breasts, giving me a glimpse of their shape before she drops her hand.

I wonder what she's drawing, whether she has any talent at all. An idea comes to me, and the sheer beauty of it pulls a low laugh from me.

"Did you say something?"

I stiffen at the sound of her voice. *Is she talking to me?*

I glance around. There's no one else in here. I ignore her.

"Eli?"

My name on her lips is unexpected, and I still, my head tilting. I want her to say it again. I like the hesitancy in her tone. It licks along my skin and wakes up my dick.

"What?"

"Did you say something to me?"

I set down my brush and step out from behind the easel. "Why the fuck would I say something to you?"

"I thought I heard—"

I'm across the room and in front of her before she finishes speaking. Her words break off with a gasp as I close the distance until my face is inches from hers.

"Thinking isn't your strong point. Like your mother. I bet your talents match hers, though." My eyes dip to her breasts before returning to meet hers, and my lip curls up on one side when pink fills her cheeks. "Why are you even in here? Shouldn't you be on your knees for Jace? Why don't you fuck off out of here and go suck his dick? Get practice in for when you follow in your mom's steps and hook yourself a rich sugar daddy."

Heat radiates out from my jaw, and it takes a second for my brain to catch up with what my skin is telling me. She's slapped me, *hard*, across the cheek.

"Struck a nerve, did I?" I reach out and tap her cheek gently with my fingers.

She flinches, even though I barely touched her.

My smile is a baring of teeth. "That's your only freebie. The next one will cost you ... and I think you'll find the price is too high for you, *Princess*."

CHAPTER 23

ARABELLA

“Why can’t you leave me alone, you *freak*?” My hand aches from slapping him so hard. “You don’t know anything about me. Just what you’ve made up in your twisted head.”

“I know *everything* about you. I’ve seen your type plenty of times before.” Something cold flickers in Eli’s eyes, his teeth snapping together.

The voice of reason is screaming at me to back away. Instead, I hold my ground. “I’m nothing like Elena.”

“You’re weak and pathetic.”

My chin trembles at the sneer in his tone. “I’m not weak.”

Eli smiles, baring his teeth at me. “You’re just unwanted baggage waiting to be cut loose. Your mom doesn’t give a fuck about you unless it suits her. You know that, right? It’s one thing we have in common. We’ll both take great pleasure in getting rid of you.”

“Does scaring people get you off?”

“More than you can ever imagine. Do I scare you, Princess?”

“Don’t fucking call me that.” The bitterness of my tone only makes his smile widen. “What happened to you to make you so spiteful and vile?”

A blank expression shutters his face, but his eyes gleam dangerously. “Get the fuck out of my art studio, you piece of trash.”

I grab my sketchbook, and bolt for the door. His stare burns into my shoulder blades the whole way. Why does he have to ruin my peace and solitude? Did he deliberately set out to find and torment me?

I clutch my book to my chest, rushing blindly down the hallway, anger, irritation, and fear vying for dominance.

Rough hands grab my hips, and before I can fight, I’m twisted around. Lips smash down on mine. The kiss is slow and clumsy.

“Stop it.” I push Jace away.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t.”

His brow dips in a frown. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Jace tips my chin up with his finger. “You don’t look fine.”

“I had a run-in with Eli.”

Jace swears under his breath. “What did he do?”

Shifting nervously from foot to foot, I glance back along the hall toward the art room. “He just tried to intimidate me.”

Jace’s expression hardens. “That son of a bitch needs to be taught a lesson.”

When he takes a step in the direction of the room, I grab his arm. “Leave it. Please. I don’t want you to get in any trouble because of me.”

“Want me to walk you back to your room?”

Eli’s cruel words echo through my head.

Shouldn’t you be on your knees for Jace? Why don’t you fuck off out of here and go suck his dick? Get practice in for when you follow in your mom’s steps and hook yourself a rich sugar daddy.

I shake my head. I don’t want to encourage him into thinking he can grab and kiss me whenever he wants. “No, thanks.”

Laughter erupts along the hallway. We turn to see Garrett, Kevin, Evan, Miles, Brad, and Lacy heading in our direction.

Evan’s face lights up when he sees us. “Hey, Michigan, you coming out tonight?”

Kevin elbows him in the ribs. “Keep your fucking voice down, you idiot.”

Bracing his arm against the wall behind my head, Jace leans in closer. “After dinner, a few of us are sneaking out to the woods. Do you want to come?”

“After curfew?”

He nods. “We smoke and talk. Someone might even bring a six-pack.”

Evan throws his arm around his friend’s neck and makes kissing noises. “Make out.”

Jace rolls eyes and smacks him on the head. “Shut up.”

Rubbing his forehead, Evan laughs, backing away. “Of course, she’s going to come. Right, Arabella?”

All eyes turn my way. Heat crawls up the back of my neck. I’m almost overwhelmed by the need to fit in.

“Okay.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of black.

Eli.

I have no idea how long he's been standing there. Jace follows my gaze, but by then, Eli has already disappeared.

"I need to go and take a shower." The excuse is the first thing I can think of.

I don't wait for anyone to reply, and hurry along the hallway.

Why did I agree to go out? I'd rather be curled up in bed with a book than hang out while others drink and smoke around me. It's going to end up being a boring couple of hours when I could have spent it studying.

When I open my locker, my heart misses a beat. There's a piece of paper inside. I slide in a book, and cover the note with my hand, curling my fingers around the edges to hide it. Door shut again, I lock it and stuff the paper into the pocket of my jeans.

The faint scent of Lacy's favorite perfume lingers in the air when I enter our room. I close the door behind me, drop my bag on the floor by my bed and dig out the paper to read the note.

Good Girl. If you want to play again, choose cheesecake for dessert at dinner.

A warm, fuzzy flush fills me at the praise.

If I want to play?

I sink down the edge of my bed. It has to be another dare.

Remembering the reaction this morning to the first one I'd pulled off, it had been worth the lack of sleep. I grin, recalling the laughter from the other students. The chef hadn't been happy, but it hadn't taken them long to figure out where I'd hidden the coffee.

Something inside my chest flutters to life.

Do I want to play again?

Do I want to risk another silly prank?

I smile, already imagining the taste of cheesecake on my tongue.

The next dare is on.

CHAPTER 24

ELI

Something, an emotion I can't put a name to, unfurls inside me when I see Jace grab Arabella and press a kiss to her lips. My fingers curl into fists, my jaw clenches, and I have to stop myself from starting forward and pulling him off her.

Patience, I tell myself. This is a marathon, not a quick sprint.

Everything hinges on her actions at dinner and whether she wants to take another dare. I think she will. I saw the look in her eyes at breakfast, the exhilaration of breaking the rules.

She gives off this good girl impression to everyone around her, but I've read her diary, and there's a darker side to Arabella. One that I intend to draw out, to use, to put on display to the world and show that she's rotten to the core ... just like her mother.

But what if she isn't? What if she really is what she appears to be? I shrug off that thought. No one is what they seem. Least of all gold-diggers.

I retreat to the art studio before Arabella and her friends see me and examine the painting I've started. When I realize what I've been painting, I take it off the stand and tear it up. No one needs to see it. Least of all the girl it represents.

Tossing it into the trash, I pull a box of matches out of my pocket and strike one. It sends the painting up in flames once I drop it onto the paper. When I'm satisfied it's burned enough, I use the fire extinguisher to put out the flames, then leave the studio and head back to my room.

It's empty when I get there. Kellan is off doing ... whatever he does when he's not with me. I pull out a small box from beneath my bed, find the key in my pocket and unlock it. Arabella's diary is inside.

I take it out, sit on my bed and thumb through it. There's a lot of material I can work with inside it. She doesn't hold back on her thoughts, her dreams, her desires ... and I've already highlighted some that I *really* want to test her boundaries on. But first, I have to ease her into it. I need to choose dares that will slowly increase her confidence, her desire to take risks, and her *excitement* at taking part in something just a little ... taboo.

And I know just what to do next. All I need is confirmation that she wants to play.

I take out the other item from the box, a thick pile of parchment paper—the same paper the dare was written on. I’ve been practicing my skills and can write in a way that’s similar enough to the original dare so that anyone who hasn’t studied the writing won’t notice the difference.

I smooth out a sheet, take out a fountain pen and start to write.

You’re being such a good girl. I like that. Your next dare is this. I want you to go outside after curfew tonight and hang a pair of panties on the entrance door to the gymnasium.

I wonder if she’ll do it. It ticks off two things she mentions in her diary. The desire to break the rules and the dream she had about being outside in just her underwear. This isn’t *quite* as risqué as doing that, but it should give her a similar thrill.

I wait for the ink to dry and then fold it up, ready for Kellan to take when everyone is busy, and we’ve seen what decision she makes.

I’m one of the last people to arrive in the cafeteria for dinner, Kellan a step behind me. We head directly to our table and take our seats. I’m sitting with my back to the room today, with Kellan facing everyone. His lips twitch and he leans forward across the table.

“Guess cheesecake was the only choice today.” He reaches out a hand and I place the folded parchment in it. “I’ll be back.”

I settle back on my seat and wait. He’s back after a few minutes, flashing me a grin as he walks to the counter and picks out food for us both. He avoids the cheesecake, choosing to go for fruit instead and comes back to our table.

“Pizza.” He places a plate in front of me.

“I can see that.”

“So, what did you write?”

“You’ll find out if she follows through.” I can’t stop a smile though, thinking about how she’ll react when she reads it.

Will she back out? Will she do it? Is she looking around the room wondering who is responsible? Will she suspect me?

The only answer I care about is whether she’ll do it. I hope she does. I *really* hope she does.

“Hey, Travers?” I meet Kellan’s eyes, silently asking him who’s speaking. He raises an eyebrow and looks past me.

“It’s Jace,” he murmurs around a slice of pizza. “He’s coming over.”

“I heard you tried to scare Bella today. Leave her the fuck alone.” He stops at the side of our table.

I ignore him and take a bite of pizza.

“Are you listening to me?” His hands slam down on the tabletop.

“Pretty sure the entire school can hear you.” I don’t look at him.

“Stay the fuck away from her.”

I swallow the pizza down, then slowly lift my head and look at him. His cheeks are flushed, sweat beading his brow, and his eyes are darting around the room. I wonder if he’s stoned. He must be, to be brave enough to stand so close to me. Something is obviously impairing his thought process because if he was thinking clearly, he would *never* put himself within my reach. I let my gaze move over him. His face, his throat, down his chest. I pause at his groin. The dirty bastard is hard. He’s excited by the idea of confronting me. Fucking idiot.

I reach out a hand, my fingers curl around the handle of the knife and in one quick move I lift it and slam it down between his spread fingers. He jumps back.

“What the actual fuck?”

“Next time I won’t miss. Fuck off.” I could have been telling him the time, my tone is that bland.

“You nearly fucking took my fingers off.”

I push my chair back, the scrape against tile loud in the now-silent cafeteria. I stand and turn to face him.

“Are you finally brave enough to take me on, Black?” My voice is soft. “Are you ready to face me? Right now? Right here? Do you *really* want to do this? Is it time?”

CHAPTER 25

ARABELLA

The flames of the little campfire send red sparks into the breeze in the dark. Its warmth radiates into my skin, where I'm huddled on one of the fallen logs in the clearing around it. We're just past the cemetery with its creepy crumbling stone graves and iron-metal gate, but it feels like it could be miles from anywhere.

My mind is buzzing with thoughts of the piece of paper tucked away in my pocket. I found the new dare in my locker right after dinner.

The words written on it are on a constant loop inside my head.

You're being such a good girl. I like that. Your next dare is this. I want you to go outside after curfew tonight and hang a pair of panties on the entrance door to the gymnasium.

I haven't been given much time to decide if I am going through with the task.

Jace is sitting beside me, sipping from his third can of beer and sneaking sideways glances in my direction. He's been quiet since his run-in with Eli earlier. Everyone saw their confrontation and the way Jace quickly backed down. I'm pretty sure his pride is hurt. I have no idea what possessed him to confront my stepbrother when I told him not to.

Brad and Lacy are making out across from us. Tina is giggling where she's wedged between Evan and Garrett. Maggie is sitting in Kevin's lap while Bret seems to be trying to get his tongue all the way down Linda's throat. The only boy not paired up is Miles. He's on the other side of Evan, swigging his drink, staring into the fire.

"Here."

I blink at the voice, and the fingers of the hand I have stuffed in the pocket of my hoodie closes around the soft cotton of the panties hidden inside.

Kevin leans across to offer me the joint he's smoking.

I shake my head. "No thanks."

"Come on." He smiles. "It will help loosen you up."

I take it from his outstretched hand, bring it to my lips and inhale awkwardly. Smoke fills my lungs, and my throat closes up. The coughing

comes thick and fast.

Laughter ripples around the group.

“First time smoking?” Linda asks.

“Yes,” I croak.

Tina sniggers. “It shows.”

“Didn’t you puke after your first cigarette?” Evan presses a kiss to her neck.

She punches him in the arm. “Shut up.”

I return the joint to Kevin, then rise from the log and escape toward the edge of the firelight. My attention is trained on the outline of the cemetery I can just make out beyond.

I need to get to the gymnasium.

My mind is already plotting out the route while my eyes trace the solid dark silhouettes in the graveyard. A wild unfamiliar excitement uncurls low in my belly.

“You looking for ghosts?” Jace has joined me.

I lean against the nearest tree. “Lacy told me about her old roommate ... what happened to her.”

“They found Zoey over there.” He nudges his chin to my left.

“Do you really think it was a curse from the dares?”

He moves closer. “Many students do. Personally, I think Travers had something to do with it.”

“What makes you say that?”

Catching my elbow, he urges me to turn around. “He and Kellan were always sniffing around her.”

I flatten my hand against his shoulder to keep him at bay. “Jace, don’t.”

His hands find my waist. “You know I like you, Arabella. I’ve made no secret of that.”

“I told you before. I just want to be friends.”

“I won’t let things get complicated. I promise.” He dips to kiss me, his tongue pushing between my lips. He tastes of smoke, beer, and desperation.

As his palms move up my ribcage, I grab his wrists. “Stop it.”

“Don’t you like me, Bella?” He sways on his feet, words slightly slurred.

He’s drunk, and the knowledge makes me uneasy. “I do. It’s just ...”

“You’ve never done this before,” he finishes for me.

My face grows hot with mortification.

Jace touches the blush on my cheek with the tip of one finger. "Damn, you really are a virgin, aren't you?"

I propel him back a step with my hand, and stalk around him.

"Don't be mad at me. I'm sorry. I'm a little drunk, and I really want you." There's a whine to his voice that sets my nerves on edge.

Evan passes me on the edge of the firelight. "Hey, Michigan, if you don't like Jace enough to pop your cherry, I don't mind doing it for you."

Cheeks still burning, I flip up my middle finger at him. "Get lost, Evan."

He laughs, eyes alight with amusement. "I'm just messing with you."

I don't reply and walk off through the trees in the direction of the cemetery. Leaving the quiet chatter of the group behind me, the snapping of twigs behind me becomes the focus of my attention.

"Wait up." Miles appears beside me, hands in the pocket of his jeans. "I'll walk you to the tree line. It's safer to stick together."

I don't slow my steady pace.

"Jace not your type?"

"Is this the part where you start hitting on me too?"

He snorts. "You're not my type."

"You mean I'm not a cheerleader."

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me to a stop. "You don't have a dick."

I blink and stare up at him. "You're gay?"

Miles nods.

My eyes dart back in the direction of his friends. "Do they know?"

"Hell no." He shuffles his feet in the dirt. "No one in the school knows. I don't need that kind of attention from the other jocks."

His gruff voice startles me, and I narrow my eyes. "Why are you telling me this?"

Miles stares down at me for a beat. "Is it true? Are you Travers' stepsister?"

I tense at his words, and just like that, the fragile sense of normality I've let relax me the last week shatters.

My mouth is so dry I have to swallow a few times before I can answer. "How do you—"

"I overheard Kellan talking to Eli about you."

No point in lying now. "Yes, it's true, but I've only known Eli for a couple of weeks. He hates me."

“Your parents didn’t introduce you before the marriage?” Miles’ voice is soft.

I shake my head. “Our parents got married in Vegas after only knowing each other for a week.”

“That’s some crazy shit.”

“Are you going to tell the others?” My palms are sweaty just at the thought.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re different, and I’m a good judge of character. I think we can help each other.” He’s dead serious. I can hear it in his tone.

“What do you mean?”

“Jace is persistent. I’ve seen him go after girls with ruthless single-mindedness until he gets what he wants. Your virginity is just another trophy to him. He’ll keep pushing until you give it up.”

My heart sinks at his words. “Thanks for the warning.”

Miles steps closer. “I can protect you from his advances.”

“You’re going to be my knight in shining armor?” I joke with a shaky laugh.

“I’ll be your fake boyfriend.”

My brain stutters for a moment. “What?”

“Starting tomorrow,” he continues. “I’ll carry your books. We hold hands. Whatever else we need to do to convince everyone we’re dating. Your virginity stays intact, and no one finds out I have a boyfriend back home.”

Curiosity wins over my suspicion. “What’s his name?”

“Enrico.” Miles holds up his phone and swipes the screen, bringing it to life. Tapping his photo gallery, an image of him kissing a handsome tanned, black-haired boy flashes up for me to see. “He’s a musician and plays the guitar. He has the sweetest voice.”

“You look good together.”

“So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?” He glances back the way we came.

I mull over his proposal. “You’re trusting me to keep your secret?”

“It works both ways. Plus, if people find out, you got me to back you up. To let them know you aren’t a psycho like Eli.”

“Jace won’t be happy,” I point out.

Threading his arm through mine, he urges me into a walk. “You let me worry about him.”

I let him guide me through the shadowy trees. “Okay, we have a deal.”

“I better get back to them,” he says when we reach the tree line. “Or no one will remember to put out the campfire.”

“I’ll catch you tomorrow.” I veer off into the blackness when I’m certain he’s gone.

He knows who I am. What I am to Eli.

Anxiety squeezes my chest.

The countdown until others know has begun.

I crush the delicate material of the panties in my pockets until my nails bite into my palm.

You’re being such a good girl. I like that. Your next dare is this. I want you to go outside after curfew tonight and hang a pair of panties on the entrance door to the gymnasium.

I latch onto those words, picturing the note, the dare.

The closer I get to the gymnasium, the stronger the excitement in the pit of my stomach builds, obliterating my apprehension that, at any moment, my world might implode. Curling my fingers into fists to stop them from shaking, adrenaline zigzags through my body.

I cast a look around, aware that security could be down here at any time.

I need to time the pattern of their rounds. The stray thought is something I tuck away for later consideration.

I keep to the wall, and inch toward the corner of the building. The brickwork is rough under my fingertips. When I reach the door, I take the scrap of cotton out of my pocket and hang it on the handle.

The white material is bright, like a flag against the metal. They aren’t anything special. I’d just seized the first pair of panties my fingers touched out of my drawer.

I spin around, and sprint back to the dorm building without a backward glance. My lungs are on fire, my heart is thumping madly in my chest. The sweet rush of adrenaline fuels my legs until I’m inside my room. I know it’s not going to last, though. As fast as the sensation has overtaken me, it leaks away, leaving me shaking, tired, but exhilarated.

CHAPTER 26

ELI

I picked the entrance to the gymnasium because I can see it from my window. I get up and check again.

Nothing.

Is she going to do it? I should have given her a time limit. She might not even do it tonight.

She will. She did the first dare the night she got it. She's a person who needs to do as they're told when they're told.

She'll do it tonight.

I'm about to go to bed when I see a flash of something white. I turn back to the window. There it is again.

"Turn off the light." My order is tossed at Kellan in a low voice.

He doesn't question it, just unfolds himself from where he's sprawled and crosses the room to the light switch. The room is plunged into darkness, but it makes it easier to see outside.

A smile stretches my lips. *She did it.*

I watch as she darts across the campus back to the dorm building and slips through the door.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven."

"When is security due?"

"Eleven-fifteen."

Just enough time for me to go and collect my prize.

Arabella's room is on the floor above mine, so I wait a little longer to give her time to get there, and so we don't cross in the hallway.

"I'll be back."

Kellan dashes to the window. "She did it?"

"She did. Keep watch. Flash the lights if someone is coming."

I slip on my sneakers and leave the room.

The panties hang on the door handle to the gymnasium, and I laugh softly. White cotton, plain, no-nonsense. Just like the appearance she likes to give off. My fingers close around them and tug them off the door. I'm turning back to the dorm when the lights in our window flash.

Fuck.

Someone, probably security, is coming. If I'm caught out here, she might question it. I reach behind me for the door handle and push it down. There's a soft click as the lock releases, and I step inside the room beyond.

The gymnasium is cool, quiet, and dark. That doesn't bother me. The dark isn't something to fear. I move deeper into the room and press against the wall beside one of the running machines. Security should only glance inside and then move on. Unless they shine their flashlight inside, they shouldn't see me.

It doesn't stop my heart from racing when the door opens, though, and I hold my breath and duck down. Sure enough, security doesn't enter, and the door closes almost as quickly as it opened. I wait for another ten minutes before I leave, and, even then, I'm cautious as I open the door before slipping out and running across to the dorm building.

Kellan is pacing the floor when I finally walk back inside.

"What the fuck happened? I saw security and they stood outside for a couple of minutes before moving on."

"They didn't see me. It's fine." I pull the panties out of my pocket. "Little Ms. Perfect likes to do as she's told."

"Are they worn?"

I roll my eyes and toss them at him. He lifts them to his face and makes a display of sniffing at the crotch. "All I can smell is detergent."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll get to smell her soon enough ... direct from the source. Have you seen the way she's all over Jace and his friends? Only a matter of time before she opens her legs in an all-access invitation."

He tucks the panties beneath his pillow. I'm pretty sure I can guess what he'll be doing with them once I'm out of the room. "What's next?"

I grin. "Next, we reward her for being a good girl."

"How?"

"You'll see. Get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow."

I wake from my dream with a start, one hand wrapped around my dick. A quick glance to the side tells me Kellan is still asleep, so I let my head fall back against the pillow and slowly pump up and down. My eyes slide closed, and I let my mind drift back to the dream that had woken me.

Arabella was on her knees, her mouth open and her tongue out. Her arms were behind her back, I wasn't sure if they were bound or not, but the

position pushed her breasts out. She wore the cotton panties that she'd left on the gymnasium door, but her legs were parted, and I could see the wet patch forming on them. I was standing in front of her, fisting my dick, stroking it while she waited patiently, her eyes following my every move.

I groan and throw my free arm over my face to muffle the sound. My grip tightens as I pump harder, *faster*, imagining my fingers are her mouth.

Will she swallow? Gag? Spit?

Maybe all three, but one thing is for certain, she'll want to please. Her *need* to please is written all over her diary. Her excitement whenever anyone acknowledges something she's done, praises her, compliments her.

I can use that. Twist the need until it burns like a compulsion through her veins. She'll *beg* for praise, get wet for it, do *anything* for it by the time I'm done.

My nerves tighten, and my dick swells.

Was she wet when she did the dare last night? Did she go back to her room and slip her fingers beneath her panties? Did she make herself come reliving it? Was she expecting to find her underwear still hanging on the door for the school to see this morning? Did the thought of that excite her?

My orgasm hits, my hips jerking in time with my hand as I come, and I melt, almost boneless, against the mattress.

"That must have been some dream." Kellan's voice is amused.

I roll my head sideways and force my eyes to open and find him. He's lying on his bed, head propped up on one hand as he watches me.

"Filing that away for your spank bank?" I don't care that he watched me jerk off. He knows my limits, and respects them. I'm not into guys, but I don't mind an audience.

"You supply the best material." He smirks and sits up. "Who was the star of your fantasy?"

I smile, but don't answer. "I'm going to clean up."

"Need a hand?"

I laugh. "I'm good, thanks."

CHAPTER 27

ARABELLA

“Hey, sweetheart, I’m just checking in.” Elena’s voice warbles cheerfully from the voicemail she’s left on my phone. “I hope you’re eating properly. Have you made any friends? Are you getting on with Eli?”

My lips curl at his name. *Hell will freeze over first.*

“Anyway, drop me a call or a message when you get this. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye.”

Lowering my phone from my ear, I can’t help but roll my eyes. Why is she trying to act like a real mother now? I had weeks of her never calling me over the years when she was out partying or off having sex with her men. Maybe Elliot was listening? The thought takes root, sounding the most plausible. I guess even with me stuck at boarding school, she’s trying to make a big show of being a caring mother.

I shoot her a text message as I walk across campus.

Me: Yes, I’m eating. My roommate is nice. I haven’t seen much of Eli. Schoolwork is keeping me pretty busy.

I press send, stuff my phone back into the pocket of my jeans and continue in the direction of the main building.

My attention strays toward the gymnasium, my mind spinning with unanswered questions. The panties I left on the door weren’t there Sunday morning. Nothing has been mentioned by students or security, which makes me wonder what happened to them.

Clutching the strap of the bag on my shoulder, I scrape my fingernails along the fake leather in an attempt to distract myself from the anxiousness making my muscles stiff.

Why hasn’t there been another dare? I did exactly what I was told.

I spent all of yesterday in the art room so I could lurk around my locker, waiting for another note. The anticipation became unbearable as the hours ticked by. Every time I went to check, my palms were sweaty with a combination of dread and excitement. Lunch passed in a blur. Miles brought me snacks from the vending machine when I told him I was working on a project and didn’t want to eat at the cafeteria. I didn’t see anyone else, and I

was thankful for that after Saturday night. Miles told me they all had hangovers and spent the day laying low in their dorm rooms.

When a dare still hadn't appeared right up to curfew, I went to bed with a strange feeling of deflation.

Maybe the game is over?

The thought increases my sense of gloom.

Had I really expected them to continue?

They're just silly little pranks. But I can't stop thinking about how the adrenaline had been a fun high.

"Good morning, Arabella." Miles slings his arm around my shoulders. "Do you have any preference for a cute nickname?"

Startled, I almost miss a step. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry." He gives me a sheepish grin. "You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Just distracted with schoolwork."

He arches an eyebrow, his expression screaming that he doesn't believe me, but he lets it go. "So, nickname?"

"Just don't call me *Princess*."

He laughs. "Cuddle Bug it is then."

"Okay, *Pookie*." My lips curve into a half-smile.

"We should swap numbers. Keep in contact and make this look more plausible, in case anyone has questions." Finding his phone, he waits for me to pull mine out of my pocket. He rattles off his number, and I do the same.

"Now we just need to know more about each other. What's your most played song?" He puts his phone away.

I bury my cell inside the pocket of my hoodie. "At the moment, 'Runnin' by Adam Lambert."

"I really thought you were going to say Taylor Swift."

I laugh. "What's yours?"

"'Treat you better.' Shawn Mendes."

We join the other students as they flood into the building. Jace is waiting for us when I reach my locker. Miles moves to his own a few feet away.

Jace gives me a smile. "About Saturday night. I'm sorry if I came on too strong."

"It's fine," I assure him.

"Want to go for a walk after class?"

Unlocking the combination on my locker, I throw it open. “I’m sorry. I promised Miles I’d hang out with him.”

Jace blinks. “Miles?”

My attention slides from the shock on his face to the metal interior of the locker, and my heart skips a beat. There, on top of one of my books, is a folded piece of paper. Excitement unfurls inside me like a great slumbering beast.

Jace is still talking, but I can’t hear him over the sound of my blood rushing through my ears. Snatching up the note, I keep it balled in my fist.

“Hey, man, are you trying to hit on my girlfriend?” Miles’ voice slams me out of my trance.

“Girlfriend?”

I slam the door and I swivel toward them. Confusion is stamped all over Jace’s face.

Miles wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Arabella and I started dating.”

Jace shakes his head. “No fucking way. Since when?”

The bell rings.

I clear my throat. “We hooked up yesterday. Sorry, Jace.”

Not giving me any time to say anything else, Miles propels me along the hallway. He doesn’t stop until we’re in the safety of the classroom, taking our seats with the other pupils. Jace walks in a few minutes later, his jaw tight and expression cold. As Brad, Lacy, and Evan join the class, they don’t seem to notice his mood. Eli and Kellan are the last to enter, stalking past the desks to get to their corner.

I wait until everyone has their noses buried in their books before I unfold the note with tingling anticipation.

Because you’ve been such a good girl, I’ve left you a gift. Next time you go for your run, take the woodland path. Go to the bench near the cemetery and you’ll find it there. Accepting it means you’ll want to play again.

A gift?

My cheeks warm. Conscious of the other students around me, I stick the note away in my pencil case. The day drags. Class after class seems to be endless. Lunch comes and goes, and Miles sticks to my side like glue. Even though he makes me laugh with his jokes, I can’t stop thinking about the dare in my bag. It’s my dirty little secret.

The second the last class ends, I'm out the door and tearing across the campus before I can even think. I get back to our room way ahead of Lacy. I yank open my dresser drawer to find my running clothes. It takes five minutes for me to strip and change.

I push my earbuds in and tap on a song. Fall Out Boy's 'My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark' blasts through the speakers.

I dash out of the building and sprint across the grass, heading for the tree line. The adrenaline driving through me burns the anxious feelings away. My sneakers pound against the earth as I aim for my target. Breathing steadily, I run fast, moving on autopilot as I watch for the bench.

It takes me a while to find it. Carved out of wood, it's old and weather-beaten. My gaze immediately gravitates to the small black box that's been left underneath it. Releasing a long low breath, I stand staring at it as my heart rate slows and the sweat cools on my skin.

I pull my earbuds out, and press stop on the current song playing.

Am I sure I still want to play this game? A voice cautions in the back of my head. An ember of common sense holds me captive as I listen to the silence around me.

"Yes," I whisper, the want for this stronger than anything I've felt before. The need for that glorious, sweet rush I've barely tasted.

Crouching, I carefully pick up the box and then sink down onto the edge of the bench. When I open the lid, there's a bar of chocolate inside. My favorite. A Hershey's cookies 'n' cream.

Am I being watched? It's the only way they'd know that.

The thought should be unsettling. Instead, my stomach tightens pleurably, and I move restlessly on the bench.

My gaze shifts to the piece of cloth folded next to the chocolate. Keeping the box balanced on my lap, I lift the material up by the edge.

Everything inside me tenses, and a breath whooshes out past my lips.

I check for spectators, but I'm still alone, then stare at the strip of material dangling from my fingers.

Why a blindfold?

There's only one way to find out. Standing, I take the chocolate bar and blindfold, and tuck them away into my pocket. I place the empty box where I found it, and head back to school.

At this point, I'm not sure if I should be scared or excited.

I'm sure about one thing, though.

I'm not ready to stop.

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CHAPTER 28

ELI

Arabella makes no attempt to conceal her approach and I'm hidden in the trees by the time she reaches the bench. She takes the box I've left, and examines the contents. When she glances around, I duck down. I know she can't see me. Kellan checked my location from every angle so that I could be here when she arrived.

She pockets the blindfold and chocolate bar, and hurries away. I pull out my cell and text Kellan.

Me: She took everything. Game on. Post the next dare. She'll be back in the building shortly.

I receive a thumbs-up in response. Leaving Kellan to deliver the note, I head to the tomb. We've been fortunate that no one has ever tried to get inside it. I'm not sure why. They've explored every other part of the cemetery. Maybe they're scared of the rumors of ghosts. Maybe they're just content not to break open Lord Bradley's resting place. Or maybe they're not driven to know everything about where they live like I am. I've always been driven by a need to know everything about ... well, *everything*.

I move around the tomb, my fingers trailing across the marble coffin situated in the center. If all goes well, she'll find this place soon. Not tonight, but in a couple of days. When I'm ready. When I'm *sure* she is in too deep to back out.

When my cell chimes to tell me Kellan has successfully left the note, I head back to school. My guess is Arabella will go directly to her locker. She's been checking it all weekend, waiting for a new dare. She's already becoming addicted to the thrill. It's been obvious in her behavior. I'm curious to see how far I can push that.

I detour along the hallway which holds the lockers and, sure enough, she's standing in front of hers, the door open as she stares down at something. Her bottom lip is caught between her teeth, and the pose sends a shot of lust through me. I want to replace her teeth with mine. I want to bite into the soft, plump flesh and leave my mark. I want her on her knees, like she was in my dream.

She thinks she's the predator. Her and her mother. Stalking rich families and draining them dry. But she's about to learn that she's met her match. She's the prey now. To be stalked, toyed with, feasted on, and used.

I purposely let my shoe scrape across the floor, and she jerks, head turning. Her eyes widen when she spots me, and she slams her locker closed. I say nothing, moving forward at a steady pace. When I reach her, I knock into her with my shoulder, sending her back a step. The folded sheet of parchment falls from her grip.

She crouches and snatches it back up before anyone else spots it. I don't acknowledge her and keep going, ducking my head to hide my smirk.

Kellan is at the end of the hallway. He pushes away from the wall and falls into step beside me.

"Well?"

"She has it tight in her grip. I think it's safe to assume she'll be there tonight."

"Nice." He rubs his hands together. "What's the plan?"

"We watch. We wait. We get a glimpse of our prize." I lick my lips. I want more than a glimpse, but I have to be patient.

The evening is a repeat of every evening at Churchill Bradley. Dinner is followed by clubs. Sports, music, arts—whatever a student wants to learn is made available. At eight, the cafeteria opens for ninety minutes, offering evening snacks and hot drinks for those who want them. For seniors, ninety-five is curfew, when everyone needs to return to their dorms, and ten is lights-out. For other years, it's earlier. Either way, it means that by ten thirty, everywhere is quiet.

Arabella's latest dare tells her to leave the dorm at midnight, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. She's to jog to the bench, where she will face the trees and remove her bra. It's her choice whether she takes off her top to do it or not. The bra is to remain on the bench.

Kellan thinks she'll stay covered. I'm not so sure. Her diary talks about being watched by a stranger while she undresses. I think she'll get her tits out, and secretly hope someone is watching her.

I fully intend to be that *someone*.

I reach beneath my bed to pull out her diary and flick to the page in question.

I dreamed about him again last night. My masked stranger. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there ... watching while I stripped out of my clothes.

I woke up drenched. Why does the thought of someone watching me make me feel so hot? Am I crazy? Weird? A freak? I don't know. But I like it. I like the thought of someone in the dark looking at me, seeing me.

She doesn't say whether she played with herself when she woke up. I think she did. I would put money on the fact that her fingers were on her clit before she opened her eyes. It makes me wonder whether she'll run back to her dorm tonight and get herself off.

My cell alarm goes off at eleven, and I roll off my bed. We're both dressed in black sweats and a t-shirt. I hand Kellan a ski mask and he tucks it into a pocket.

"Ready?" I ask, already knowing what the answer will be. He's bouncing on his toes, his grin so wide I'm surprised his face doesn't split.

We leave our room and make our way through the building as quietly as we can, heading up to the fifth floor, where there's a panel on the wall that leads into one of the secret tunnels which will take us beneath the building. They all connect at various points underground, with four different exits around the site. The only one I'm interested in tonight is the one that comes out by the cemetery. So, we head left, until we reach the section that links to the one from the restroom and follow it to its end. It's eleven-thirty by the time we're at the bench and we separate, each finding a place either side of the path, with the bench in the middle, giving us a view from both angles.

We've agreed to film what happens, just in case one of us misses something. The only thing we can do now is wait ...

CHAPTER 29

ARABELLA

I check the time on the screen under the safety of my blanket for the millionth time. Twenty minutes until midnight.

I bite my lip hard, before I take a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

It's go time.

Pushing back the blanket, I swing my legs over the side of the mattress and feel for my sneakers. The second my toes find them, I shove my feet into them, and tiptoe across the dark room. I find the door and slip out into the hallway. I'm prepared this time for when the lights flick on automatically. The silence in the hallways is almost deafening.

How many times can I do this without getting caught?

The thought only adds to the sense of danger enveloping me.

Scurrying along, I keep going until I'm outside. The black lycra shorts and thin matching t-shirt I'm wearing barely keep me warm. I scan my surroundings, watching for a telltale sliver of light but seeing none in the darkness.

Good. Security must be on the other side of the campus.

I keep to the shadows and get as close as I can to the grass, before I take off across it. I run flat out and push myself faster until my legs are burning with exertion and my lungs heave with each breath. Gaze locked on the inky black tree line, I don't stop until I'm past it.

My feet come to a juddering stop. I wrap my arm around the trunk of a tree to keep myself steady, fighting to suck down air. Sweat saturates my hairline, the salty drops trickling down my forehead.

I glance back at the silhouettes of the buildings. They look as though they are pieces cut out of the dark. It looks so eerie. Lifeless.

The breeze raises goosebumps over my sweat-slick skin, and I shiver.

I check the time on my phone. Eleven-fifty. I walk slowly through the trees, trying to get my bearings in the blackness. The cemetery isn't far, but I'm wary of every root and tree branch that could be on the path.

Leave your dorm at midnight, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. Jog to the bench and face the trees before removing your bra. It's your choice

whether you take off your top or not. Once completed, leave the bra on the bench.

The dare had been clear.

I continue until I recognize the outline of the cemetery. Ears straining, I listen closely for any sign I'm not alone, but the only thing I can hear is the wind rustling in the trees.

I stop beside the bench. My nipples are already hard, straining against the fabric of my bra. I check my phone again.

Midnight.

Is whoever set the dare out there? Are they watching me? They have to be.

A splinter of fear blooms inside me, tangled with a strange reckless elation that only multiplies the longer I stand there.

I want to be watched. To be seen.

In all the dark little fantasies I've had, I've secretly craved this, although I've never been brave enough to admit it out loud. *Does this desire make me bad or good?* This is my chance to find out.

The thoughts dissipate in my head as a dozen butterflies take off in my stomach.

Fingering the bottom of my t-shirt, I tug it up, baring my midriff to the cold night air. All I can hear is my thumping pulse and the shallow breaths I gulp down.

This doesn't feel real. Maybe I'm just dreaming. The sense of unreality grows.

Higher and higher, I raise my top until the bottom of my white cotton bra can be seen. Pausing, I listen closely again.

Nothing.

Dizzy with adrenaline, I inch my t-shirt up further. My breasts feel heavy and sensitive, and I moan. I'm careful to make a show of bringing the hem right up until my bra is exposed, then I free my arms one at a time, and hook the material over my head.

Leaving my t-shirt draped on the bench, I stand there in nothing but my bra and shorts.

They want to play games, but I can play them too.

I reach around behind me and unhook my bra. Covering my breasts with my left forearm, I shrug out of the strap on my right. Next, I repeat the actions. This time my right forearm hides my chest while the other strap

drops free. Keeping myself shielded, I toss the bra onto the bench in silent challenge.

The dare is complete.

I remain still, a sense of euphoric victory filling every cell in my body. A grin spreads over my face, and I snatch up my t-shirt and struggle into it. I'm careful to protect my breasts from view until I'm covered again. Twirling in a circle, I search for any sign, a movement.

A twig breaks.

I stop breathing.

The seductive sense of unreality snaps.

Someone is out there.

My legs move before my brain kicks in, and I take off through the trees, bolting in the direction of the school like a frightened deer.

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CHAPTER 30

ELI

I replay both the videos side by side. One on my cell, the other on Kellan's.

"There. Look." I pause both and enlarge the images. "She's looking around. She *wants* someone to be out there, *watching* her."

"Then why did she cover herself?" Kellan hits play on my video, and we both watch as she pulls on her t-shirt before removing her arm from her breasts.

"Because she's not ready to admit she wants to be seen. She does, though. It's not that cold. But you can see her nipples through her shirt. Look how fucking hard they are." I zoom in again, and my tongue licks over my bottom lip.

"I wish I could *see* how hard they are," Kellan mutters and I laugh.

"You will."

"You really think she enjoyed it?"

I nod. "Look at the fucking grin on her face. She knew someone was out there watching. She was trying to tease. That's why I snapped a twig and she almost wet herself." An idea comes to me, and my smile widens.

I reach for the pile of parchment I have hidden beneath my bed and pick up the pen.

Not such a good girl tonight, Arabella. If you're going to tease, you need more practice. Answer a question. Standing there in the dark, knowing my eyes were on you, how wet were you? If you were wet and excited by what you did for me, I want you to order a cherry yogurt for breakfast. If you touched yourself when you got back to your dorm, add a slice of toast. If you want to play some more, finish your breakfast with a glass of orange juice. But if you were a sweet, good girl, and your panties were dry and your pussy stayed untouched, go hungry until lunch.

"Fuck." Kellan's voice was low and rough. "I'm suddenly starving. What time is breakfast?"

I snort a laugh, fold the paper and hold it out to him between two fingers. "You know what to do."

He's out of the room less than five seconds later. I flop onto my back on the bed and pull Arabella's bra out of my pocket. I finger the material. Just as no-nonsense as her panties. Cotton, plain, and white.

I let my eyes close and I'm drifting off to sleep when Kellan slips back into the room.

"Done."

I grunt in response, and let sleep claim me.

Kellan wakes me early, already anticipating the day to come, and we're the first ones in the cafeteria. I leave him to pick up breakfast and make my way over to our table. It gives the perfect view of the entire room, and that means we can watch for Arabella's arrival without it looking like we are.

When Kellan brings the tray over, other students start to arrive. Jace and his friends are the first, loud and boisterous, but Arabella isn't with them.

"What do you think she'll do?" Kellan asks.

I pause with a piece of pancake halfway to my lips. "She'll have breakfast."

"But will she have the *correct* breakfast?"

I eat the pancake before replying. "She wants to be a good girl ... but not a *good* girl, so ..." I stop when the girl in question enters the room, her arm linked with Miles.

"What if she doesn't check her locker first?"

"Hmm?" I drag my gaze away from where she's laughing at something the jock is saying. There's a flush to her cheeks, and her laugh is almost shrill. She's nervous, on edge. I smile. "She's been to her locker already."

"How do you know?"

"I *know*. Trust me."

He falls silent, eats a couple of mouthfuls of cereal, then speaks again. "I heard she's dating Miles."

"Looks that way."

"Do you think it'll stop her from wanting to play?"

"No. Miles has money. That's what has attracted her to him. She wants what he can pay for. Same way her mother works. But she dares speak to her dirty little soul. The one she bared in the pages of her diary. She's had a taste now. She won't be able to stop."

And the more she plays, the darker it's going to get. Because I'm going to discover everything she hides and then share it with the world.

I return my gaze to Kellan. “But first, she needs to learn a lesson. She needs to understand that we’re in control, not her. It’s not her place to tease or choose how to fulfill her tasks. She follows the dare, or she stops playing.”

“What are you going to do?”

I push to my feet. “Stay here. Keep watch. I’ll see you in class.”

I skirt the outer edges of the room, taking care not to attract attention and make it out into the hallway without anyone stopping me. The English room is empty when I enter, and I walk over to the desk Arabella prefers. *Far* away from where I sit. Opening my backpack, I pull out her bra and panties and place them on her seat, with a note folded on top of it.

I’m out of the room and on the other side of the building by the time the bell rings, and I take a slow walk back so that I’m late for class. When I push open the door, Mr. Bellamy is yelling for silence and Arabella is hunched in her seat, cheeks pink and eyes downcast.

“You’re late, Mr. Travers.”

“I was in the bathroom. Didn’t hear the bell.” I slip onto my seat beside Kellan.

He leans close. “I don’t know what you did. But she was bright red when we all got here and stuffing something into her bag.”

CHAPTER 31

ARABELLA

The heat in my cheeks radiates over my face and neck, spreading through my chest. Eyes darting around wildly, I search to see if anyone is looking, but everyone's attention is on the teacher. The bra and panties I found on my chair are shoved in my bag out of sight, but I still don't know if anyone saw them.

They're mine.

The panties I left on the gymnasium door, and the bra I left on the bench. The same items that have been in the hands of whoever sent me the dares.

Pulse racing, I fidget with the note I've slipped under my book. I'm desperate to see what it says. I gave them my answer at breakfast. Ate the cherry yogurt with a slice of toast and a glass of orange juice.

I keep my eyes down, not really seeing the book on the desk in front of me. My mind spirals back to last night after I got back to my room.

In the dark, while Lacy slept, I slid my palm over my stomach, down between my legs, and found my clit. My panties had already been drenched as I rubbed myself in pleasure. All the while, I imagined a shadowy figure standing in the trees back at the cemetery. A masked man who watched while I stripped off my t-shirt and bared myself to his view. I swallowed my cry as my frantic movements under the blanket exploded into an orgasm.

"Miss Gray, can you answer the question?"

Startled, I look up to find Mr. Bellamy beside my table. "Question?"

He arches an eyebrow. "Yes. The one you would have heard if you'd been paying attention instead of daydreaming."

Laughter ripples through the class.

Embarrassment heats my cheeks and I drop my gaze. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bellamy."

He hums in his throat, tapping the top of my desk with his index finger. "I expect better of you, Miss Gray."

When he walks back to the front of his class, I catch sight of Jace and Miles looking my way. Jace mouths something I can't quite make out, while Miles rolls his eyes. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Eli and Kellan looking at me.

Thank God they came in late and didn't see the panties and bra on my chair. I can only imagine what Eli would have said. Something disgusting and lurid.

I wait until Mr. Bellamy's focus has moved from me before I covertly slip the note out. Stomach flipping with nerves, I carefully unfold the paper and read.

Go to the restroom and remove your panties. You're forbidden to wear them the rest of the day. I will know if you've been a good girl and obeyed or if you haven't.

Shit, no panties? This has to be a punishment.

The self-satisfaction I've been carrying at teasing my dare-giver melts into apprehension.

Pressing my thighs together, I feel the material of my pencil skirt brushing the tops of my knees. Why did I decide it was a good idea to wear it today? I refold the note and tuck it into my book.

Will the writer of the note really know?

It's obvious I'm being watched now, but by who?

How will they know if I've obeyed? Will the dares end if I don't do as I'm told?

A strange sense of panic coalesces in my chest.

I don't want to lose this. Am I crazy for liking it?

Hesitantly, I raise my hand.

Mr. Bellamy lowers the pen he is holding from the whiteboard. "Yes, Miss Gray?"

All eyes turn my way.

"I need to use the restroom."

"Can't it wait?"

Fighting, I shake my head. "I really need to go to the restroom, sir."

He pins me with a stare. "Fine, you have five minutes. Hurry up."

I rise quickly from my chair and weave my way through the desks and hurry out the door.

The nearest girls' restroom is just along the hallway. I push the door open, relieved to find it empty. The first stall is free, and I slip into it then lock the door.

I lick my lips, standing there, torn between discomfort and the urge to follow through. It's naughty. Something a good girl wouldn't do. Yet the writer of the dares calls me a good girl whenever I complete a challenge.

The thought of not wearing panties brings a new rush of forbidden excitement over me, and my nipples harden in the confines of my bra.

I tug up my skirt and bend at the waist easing my panties down my hips. They fall to my knees, cool air washing over my exposed pussy. I let the material pool around my ankles, then step out of them. I'm exposed and vulnerable. The knowledge brings both fear and a buzz of heady adrenaline.

Breath hissing out through my clenched teeth, I scoop the scrap of cotton up. There's already a telltale wet patch in the crotch as I stuff it in the pocket of my hoodie.

Leaving the restroom, I walk stiffly back into class, praying I'm not about to give everyone a peep show. I keep my hands at my waist, and have to mentally stop myself from smoothing down my skirt. It's a modest length. No one is going to see anything as long as I don't bend over too far.

Brad, Miles, Jace, and Eli all glance up at me as I cross the room to my table. My cheeks grow hot, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from giggling like a crazed idiot.

Oh, god, does everyone know?

Trepidation clogging my throat, I retake my seat, keeping my knees firmly together. As the class continues, I can barely concentrate on Mr. Bellamy's words. All my focus is on trying not to squirm in my seat.

CHAPTER 32

ELI

I've never had a hard-on during a class before. But when Arabella excuses herself and comes back later, cheeks flushed and eyes darting around the room, my dick springs up.

She fucking did it.

She followed my instructions and is sitting a few feet away from me without any panties on under that form-fitting skirt. I want to send her another instruction to test how far I can push her. I want to get out of the room and find somewhere private so I can take care of my dick. Mostly, I want to pull up her skirt and check for myself.

"Mr. Travers?" Mr. Bellamy's voice jerks my head up. "You seem distracted."

"Your reading of Shakespeare has made me incredibly horny ... *sir*." I end the sentence with a smirk as the teacher's eyes widen.

It takes him a second, but he swallows down his surprise and attempts to glare at me. "This is not the place for that kind of talk."

I lift one shoulder. "Can't help it, sir. The way you handle the ... prose ... is incredible." I hold his gaze. He shifts from one foot to the other, then spins away, presenting me with his back.

Kellan is shaking beside me, one hand over his mouth to contain his laughter. The rest of the class, apart from Arabella, stare at me. I let my gaze sweep over them and one by one they look away. When I reach Jace, he holds my gaze.

I hike an eyebrow. He drops his eyes.

Pussy.

And as that word flits through my mind, my attention returns to Arabella. She's sitting ramrod straight, hands in her lap, staring straight ahead. There's still a slight hint of color in her cheeks, and her bottom lip is caught between her teeth.

I could have so much fun with her right now if I didn't have to wait to leave a note in her locker.

And then it comes to me. An idea so perfect that I can barely contain my grin.

I may have missed an opportunity here, but it's one I'll rectify as soon as I can leave the grounds. I wonder if I can get a pass after English. I have a free study period. I could get to town and back within the hour. My eyes shift to Kellan, and I ease my cell from my pocket beneath my desk and tap out a message to him with my thumb.

He gives me a discreet thumbs-up after reading it, and I refocus my attention on the class going on.

I tell the office that I need to drive into town to pick up some new clothes. They're used to students wanting to change their wardrobe—we are rich, spoiled kids, after all—and they allow me and Kellan off-site for an hour. We head to my car and are out of the gates and driving toward the town less than ten minutes later.

"I could do with some new underwear."

I throw a frown at him, and he grins.

"What? It's no lie. Might as well use the opportunity you've presented me with. I only packed seven pairs."

"Seven?" I don't even know why I'm engaging in such a ridiculous conversation, but that's what Kellan does. He's never failed to be able to drag me into silliness. Maybe that's why our friendship has lasted. I'm the serious one, he's the fool. Both characteristics have made other students underestimate us more than once, and it's why we're now avoided by everyone as much as possible. Serious and funny does not mean easy to bully, as the football team has found out ... more than once.

I park outside the small mall and climb out. Kellan keeps pace beside me as we walk inside. I stop outside the cell phone store. "Do you want to go and do your ... *lingerie* shopping while I go in here?"

He waggles his eyebrows at me. "I'll buy something extra sexy to model for you later."

I don't touch *that* comment and walk inside the store. I know exactly what I'm looking for, so I'm served and back out fast. It's funny how waving cash around can make any questions go away. Instead of needing to fill in details and take out phone contracts, I bought two cell phones in cash, no name, no identity, no contracts. I go to another store and pick up two pre-pay sim cards.

Kellan is leaning against my car when I get back.

"I picked you up some stuff as well." He waves a bag at me.

“Do I even want to ask?”

“You told the office you needed clothes. I grabbed some socks and a couple of t-shirts.” His smirk tells me that’s not all that’s in the bag, but I don’t react. I’ll find out what he’s slipped in there when we’re back in our dorm. It’ll be something silly—joke underwear, tighty-whities, a thong, or leopard-print speedos.

He tosses the bag into the back of the car alongside mine, and we head back to school. We arrive with minutes to spare and make it to math just before the teacher arrives.

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CHAPTER 33

ARABELLA

Miles bumps his shoulder gently into mine. “I have to go to the pool for training. I’ll message you later.”

I hold in a grin when he gives me a wink. “Okay.”

I’ve spent most of the day in a daze, on the edge of panic at getting caught. I’ve hardly been able to focus on anything but the knowledge that I’m not wearing panties. Thankfully classes are over, and I can escape for a few hours before dinner.

Lacy comes up to my desk as I’m packing my books away. “Hey, we’re going to watch Brad and the others while they’re at football practice. Do you want to come along?”

Adding my pencils to my case, I zip it up. “I thought I might go back to our room and study.”

And change into something else because the note said nothing about keeping my skirt on.

“Seriously? That’s all you seem to do.”

“I like learning.” I return my attention to the rest of my stuff.

The second I straight up, Lacy entwines her arm through mine. “And I refuse to live with an introverted hermit.”

I let her walk me toward the door. “I’m not a hermit.”

“I get it, you know.” She flashes me a sidelong look. “You’re still settling in. Churchill Bradley Academy can be an overwhelming place. There’s the pressure of being socially acceptable. It can’t be easy coming from a state school in god knows where in Michigan, with all those metal detectors and violence. You’re not used to this kind of environment, which is why I still think you should try out for the cheerleading squad.”

I let out a sigh. “Lacy, I’m not good at dancing, and I’m pretty sure my face might crack if I have to smile that much. Also, I don’t think I can shout ‘Go Roosters’ with real enthusiasm. Plus, I don’t think Tina likes me.”

“She’s a bitch.” She laughs. “We all know that. She also had her eye on Miles. To be honest, I really thought you and Jace would hook up.”

My thoughts get all tangled up at the knowledge that Tina is interested in Miles. “I ... have a thing for swimmers.”

Fingers twitching, I battle the need to smooth down my skirt. No one has noticed I'm without underwear. At least, no one *I've* noticed.

Someone knows.

My pulse accelerates at the thought, and I go hot, then cold.

"Come on." Lacy tugs gently on my arm. "Come watch Brad practice with me."

"Fine." The need to bolt still strong. "I'll come, but I just need to go back to our—"

"Oh, no." Shaking her head, her grip on me tightens. "I'm not giving you the chance to go and hide."

She doesn't allow me to escape as we leave the main building and head around toward the football field. A cool breeze sends goosebumps over my skin, and I can feel them all the way up the inside of my thighs. I try to ignore how it makes me shiver, while my stomach clenches.

Eleven players are already running around on the field when we arrive. Their coach is standing on the sidelines shouting instructions. The whole team is wearing black shorts and jerseys with the academy's red and white rooster mascot on the front.

"Coach Braun used to play for an international team before he retired," Lacy brags as we head to the stands. "He thinks Brad has the talent to make a name for himself in the game."

A handful of other students are spread out, taking up seats. We end up joining the cheerleaders, right at the front, who are huddled together.

Slipping carefully into my seat, I keep my knees pressed tightly together. Why did I let Lacy talk me into this? I could have changed by now. This is risky.

You like the risk.

Tina scowls. "What's *she* doing here?"

Lacy stows her bag by our feet beside mine. "I asked her to come."

"Why?"

"Because she's nice."

Tina's eyes widen. "Oh my god, Lacy. She's your pet project this term, isn't she?"

"Pet project?" I echo.

Linda tosses me a sympathetic look. "Zoey was her last one, before ..."

"She died." Tina finishes bluntly.

I twist to face my roommate. "What are they talking about?"

“It’s nothing.” She waves her hand in the air dismissively. “You are not a charity case, Arabella. I genuinely do like you.”

Something fragile inside me dulls, the small hope of friendship flickering into embers.

Is that really how they all see me? Something to fix? Someone beneath them?

I breathe through a sudden burst of anger, counting to ten in my head. “I think I’m going to go.”

Lacy frowns. “But we’ve just got here.”

I rise, only to be stopped when someone calls my name.

“Hey, Arabella, where are you going?”

I look at Brad. Evan and Jace are behind him. “I have some things to do. Enjoy your practice.”

What would they think of me if they knew I was standing here with no panties on?

Instead of feeling a jolt of arousal, the thought makes me uncomfortable.

“Come on. Stay.”

I move along the seats. “No thanks.”

“Enough flirting with your girlfriends.” Coach Braun’s voice booms out across the field. “Get back to work.”

“Where’s your team spirit?” Jace calls as the boys jog beside the stands to keep up with me. “I’m sure you have a little cock inside you!”

Evan gives me a wink. “If not, do you want one?”

“Dude, you just admitted to having a tiny dick.” Jace laughs, clutching his middle.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” the other jock protests.

Ignoring them, I set off away from the field toward the main school building. When I check my locker, there’s nothing waiting for me, and the disappointment only sours my mood further.

CHAPTER 34

ELI

I don't leave any dares for Arabella for the rest of the week. Between classes, and the art project Mr. McIntyre has set, which means each of us in the art group has to plan out and then design a piece for our final grade, I don't have a lot of free time. The first couple of weeks at school are always busy as everyone settles into a routine and falls back into the academic mindset that we've lost over the summer. I also want to take a few days to see how she reacts to not having any further communication, especially after her 'punishment' for trying to tease me.

I spend Thursday evening charging and setting up the two new cell phones I purchased. Both are basic models. No smart features, no touch screen. Just the ability to call and text. Even the picture quality is poor. But I don't need any of the usual features that come with a cell phone, just the ability to send a text whenever I wish.

Once that's done, I put one in a small black box with a little note folded on top of it, and put it at the bottom of the closet, ready for when I need it. The other I put into my nightstand and lock the drawer. Once I'm satisfied both are safe, I head out of the dorm building and over to the room Mr. McIntyre has said I can use for my art project. It's situated on the same floor as the gymnasium, but on the opposite side of the building. I skirt around the outside, even though I could take a shortcut through the gym and walk along the empty hallway to the room at the end and push open the door.

A slab of black marble stands in the center. It stands taller than I am and is cool to the touch as I smooth my hand over it. I can already envision what it will become, but first, I need to spend time with it, and learn its flaws so I can use them to sculpt the perfect piece. I've spent three days sourcing this particular stone. It needed to be black, which is the rarest marble, and as flawless as possible for me to work with.

One of the positive points of being in a school focused solely on rich families is that the price tag of ten thousand dollars meant nothing and the stone was bought and shipped within twenty-four hours.

“Only the best for our students,” I murmur, mockery rich in my tone as I walk around the stone. I wonder if they’ll feel the same way when they see what I do with it. I have six months to turn it into what I envision in my mind. It’ll be a challenge, but one I’m looking forward to.

The room I’ve been allocated has floor-to-ceiling windows, with venetian blinds. They’re closed currently but it means when I finally start work, I have lots of natural light to work with, *if* I decide to use it. I’m not sure I want people to be able to see what I’m doing. I also have a key, so I can keep the room locked and my work away from prying eyes.

The room itself is bare, other than the marble in the center. I need to bring in the tools I’ll need, as well as a workbench and maybe a chair. All things I can access easily. Another upside of being from a family with money. Nothing is unavailable.

But those are concerns for another day. I take the key from my pocket and step out of the room, locking the door behind me. Kellan should be finishing up his computer science class and we’ve agreed to go to the gym before dinner.

When I arrive for the Social Studies class the next morning, I walk into chaos. Jace and Brad have cornered Lewis, our resident shy computer nerd. I don’t know what’s triggered them into baiting him, but his head is down, his cheeks are as red as his hair, while Jace holds onto his laptop bag and shakes it above his head. Brad is quieter, his head close to Lewis’s and I can see his lips moving as he speaks in the other boy’s ear.

A quick glance around tells me the teacher hasn’t arrived yet, nor has half the class. It’s just Lewis, Jace, Brad, and their friends, plus me and Kellan.

I should ignore them and go to my seat. Lewis means nothing to me. We’ve barely traded words since joining the school. And yet I find myself veering left instead of right to my desk until I’m standing behind Jace.

I tap his shoulder. He turns, and I bury my fist into his stomach. The bag above his head drops and Kellan darts forward to grab it. He shoves it at Lewis, while I smirk at Jace.

“Want to try tormenting someone who isn’t scared of you?”

“Fuck you, Travers,” he gasps, clutching his stomach.

“I’ve seen the size of your dick. You’ve probably already tried to fuck me, but it’s so small I didn’t even notice.”

The people surrounding us erupt into laughter. Jace turns red. I turn my back on him and walk across the room to my seat, Kellan at my heels. A shadow falls across my desk, and I lift my gaze to find Lewis hovering beside it.

“Thank you.”

“Fuck off, Lewis. We’re not friends. I just don’t want to be stuck in here after class ends.” I twist on my seat to face Kellan, dismissing Lewis from my attention.

“Alright, class, take your seats. Jace, why are you holding your stomach?” Mr. Davis walks in, tossing his briefcase onto his desk as he moves past it. “If you’re sick, go and find the nurse. If not, sit down and let’s get started.”

“I’m not sick,” the football jock mutters, and I turn to look at him, lifting one eyebrow.

His eyes meet mine, then jerk away, and he stumbles back to his seat just as Arabella and Lacy walk into the room.

As always, Arabella’s gaze seeks out mine, checking to see where I was. I’m not sure if she’s aware of it, but she does it in every single class we share. Not that I can say anything, because I do the same.

I hold her gaze until she drops her lashes and looks away, then settle back into my seat and reach down to pull the textbook out of my bag. Four more hours to go, and then it will be time to play again. I wonder idly if she’s missed getting dares this week, or whether she’s relieved.

I guess we’ll find out tonight.

CHAPTER 35

ARABELLA

Eyes closed, head resting against the wall where I'm sitting on the floor, the lyrics of 'In my Blood' by Shawn Mendes curl themselves through my thoughts.

It's been a week since my last dare.

The punishment.

Each day I check my locker, but there's no note waiting for me.

Did I do something wrong? I did everything they asked. Maybe the game is over? Maybe they moved on to someone else? Wasn't I good enough to continue?

Doubts and questions circle in my head. It only adds to the heavy weight that's gradually settled over me as the days stretched on.

Elena hasn't bothered to leave another message. I suppose the vague information I gave her was enough to keep up with appearances. I've had a few random texts from Amanda, mostly about how wonderful Darren is. He's all she talks about now.

My phone vibrates, I check my messages. An image of Miles pulling a goofy face fills my screen.

I chuckle, amused at the silly selfies he's been sending me all week.

Miles: Why aren't you in the cafeteria?

Me: I'm not hungry.

Miles: Have you eaten lunch?

I frown at my phone.

Me: No.

I'm not in the mood for Lacy and the others today. Or Eli with his icy death stares. I've been avoiding them all week. Mostly spending time buried in the art project I've started working on for Mr. McIntyre's class. I stare at the drawings of the fantasy ball gown in my sketchbook. It's everything a princess could desire. A piece of make-believe that I'm already itching to bring to life. It's not like I have anything else here to keep me distracted. I can pour all my attention and focus into creating this over the next six months instead of seeking validation from those around me.

The sensation of being watched washes over me. When I look up, Miles is watching me from the mouth of the aisle. I tap stop on the song and tug my earbuds out. “How did you find me?”

He joins me on the floor between the bookcases. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you hanging out in the stacks at the library.”

“Being surrounded by books is my safe place.” I close my sketchbook, gather up the pencils I’ve left on the floor beside me and push them into their case. “What are you doing here?”

Miles unzips his bag and hands me a drink. “I’m making sure you eat. This is the third day you skipped lunch this week. I raided a vending machine.”

I take it from him. He produces a chocolate bar, a bag of chips, and a banana.

“Thanks.” Pushing back the tab on my can, I take a sip before placing it on the floor and reaching for the fruit.

“Want to tell me why you’re hiding?”

“I’m just not feeling very sociable at the moment.”

“Is this over what happened at the football practice?”

I’d told him about what had happened that evening after dinner. The need to vent had been too strong, and Miles was happy to listen while I complained about my roommate.

Unpeeling the banana, I wave it in the air between us. “I don’t want Lacy’s misguided pity.”

I’m tempted to tell him about the dares, but something stops me.

He watches the banana sway from side to side in front of his face. “I hate to say this, but I think Lacy is right. You should join the cheer squad.”

My mouth drops open, and my eyebrows shoot up. “Nooo, why would you say that?”

“One, I think you’d be good at it. Two, they’ll start to see you as *you*. Three, it gives you something to do other than studying all the time. I swear it’s not healthy.”

“You’re only saying that because you hate it.”

His gaze meets mine, searching and thoughtful. “Even brainiacs need to do something fun. Plus, you’ll look cute in the uniform.”

“You really want me to end up as one of the clones on the squad?” I take a bite out of my banana, and glower at him as I chew.

Miles grins. “You can be a rebel on the inside.”

I eat the rest of the food, listening to him fill me in on gossip and what's been happening on the swim team. By the time the bell rings, my stomach is full, and I'm thankful to have Miles looking out for me. We run into Lacy on the way into class.

"Arabella has decided to join your cheer team," he informs her, tucking his hands into the pocket of his jeans.

"Try out for it," I amend.

Lacy squeals, clapping her hands as she bounces up on her toes. "Fabulous."

Curling my fingers into the front of my hoodie, I pray I've done the right thing.

An hour before dinner, I wander back from my room to the main part of the school. Mainly it's to escape Lacy's nonstop chatter about cheerleading, but I also can't fight the habit of checking my locker.

How pathetic am I? I should just accept the fact that whoever is issuing the dares is done with me.

I barely have the door of my locker unlocked when a flash of white greets my gaze. The air in my lungs locks tight for a second. All I can do is stare in shock at the paper that's been left on top of my books. My hands shake as I slowly reach the note. Darting a nervous look around the empty hallway, I unfold it.

Go to the bench in the cemetery an hour after curfew. Set the timer on your cell for five minutes, put on the blindfold, and don't move until the timer goes off.

Questions swirl in my head as a bubble of elation swells in my chest. I keep the note gripped tightly in my hand. After I lock the door, I walk along the hall.

Why had it taken so long for them to send another dare? Why the blindfold? Am I going to get to meet them? They made me wait a whole week. Why should I even go?

Opening the note again, I scan the black written words with a growing sense of anticipation.

I need to know.

CHAPTER 36

ELI

We take to the tunnels to get to the cemetery. That way, we don't have to worry about security or being spotted by Arabella. Once we're at our spot near the bench, Kellan moves to where he'd been the last time we recorded her, and we both pull on our ski masks. We're dressed all in black so we blend into the darkness, and once the masks are in place, I can't see Kellan where he's crouching down behind the trees.

I hear her coming before I see her. The snap of twigs, crunch of leaves, and the soft pad of her footfalls as she jogs along the path. I shift my stance, making sure my cell phone's camera doesn't have the flash on, and tap record. I've found the perfect position on the branches of the trees to secure it, so I don't need to hold it, and it'll record the entire thing.

Why am I recording it?

Why not?

When she finally comes into view, I smile. She's wearing black, the same as we are, her sneakers are the only flash of color in the darkness. She doesn't look around and makes straight for the bench and sits down.

"Are you out here?" Her voice breaks the silence, soft and hesitant.

I don't reply.

Her tongue sweeps out to dampen her bottom lip. "I did what you said ... the other day. And I'm here now ... like you instructed."

Instructed. Interesting choice of word. Not *dared*, which is what I would have expected her to use had I even considered the fact she would want to hold a conversation.

She fiddles with something at her waist, and then her cell phone is in her hand. She must have a bag of some sort wrapped around her; one I can't see. The light from the screen highlights her face as she frowns down at it, her fingers tapping away. When she's satisfied with whatever she's doing, she sets it beside her and her fingers dip into the bag again and pull out the blindfold I'd left for her.

She hesitates, the slim strip of material draped across her fingers.

"I can't believe I'm doing this." The words are muttered but they still reach me.

Truthfully? I can't believe she's doing it, either. I wouldn't. But here we are, and she's wrapping the material around her head, covering her eyes.

"I set the timer for six minutes to give me time to put it on." The words are louder, talking to me again, assuming I'm here ... watching her. "It's dark without the blindfold. I can't see *anything* with it." There's a hitch to her voice, a tremor, as what she's doing finally connects in her mind. She tucks her hands between her thighs, her back straight and her head up and waits.

She's sitting in the dark, alone, blindfolded, and nobody knows she's here. *Anything* could happen to her.

I recite the first three verses of 'The Raven' by Poe in my head, then straighten and step onto the path. Kellan has already set a timer on my smart watch, which will count down from five minutes once I tap the screen. I tap start and walk out.

I stop in front of her, my feet inches from hers, but she doesn't react. Her breathing remains the same. She doesn't flinch. The blindfold is doing its job and she can't see me.

But I *want* her to know I'm here. I want her to react. I want her *fear*, so I scuff one shoe against the dirt. Her breath hitches again, her lips parting to allow her tongue out to wet her lips.

I follow the path it takes as it snakes from one side of her mouth to the other and mimic the motion with my own tongue over my lips. With careful movements, I place the small black box I'm holding onto the bench beside her cell. This close, I can hear her quick breaths, see the rise and fall of her breasts, and I reach out before I can stop myself. My hand hovers close to her.

I could touch her. She could scream. No one would see. No one would hear.

I stand there, frozen, arguing with myself, with my instincts, and instead of closing my fingers over her breast, I shift position and curl a lock of hair around them instead. Her head swings sideways.

"Who's there?" Fear is rich in her voice, the realization of how much danger she could really be in, and my dick is so fucking hard it's almost unbearable.

I release her hair and drag a finger over her cheek, along her jaw, and over her lips. She jerks back, but she doesn't scream. Her breath stills, stops, lips parting as I trace their shape. They're soft, softer than I expected.

Her mom's look full of collagen, and I expected hers to be the same. They're plump, curved like a cupid's bow, appealing to my artist's eyes. I'd been sure they would be as fake as everything else. I'm surprised by the discovery that they're not.

I tap her bottom lip, and lean close until my mouth is beside her ear. "Open," I whisper, hoping that her heightened sense of fear combined with the whisper I'm using stops her from recognizing me.

Her mouth drops open.

"Lick."

Her tongue touches the pad of my finger, barely there, the lightest of touches.

I'm taking a risk. A quick glance at my watch shows me the numbers have turned red. That means I have less than two minutes before her alarm goes off. But I can't help it. I need to see how far I can push.

"Like you mean it, Kitten." I tap her bottom lip again.

Her tongue finds my finger, licks over the top and I slowly push it into her mouth.

"Suck."

She swallows, and I'm positive nerves are the reason. I tut beside her ear. "I said suck, not swallow. Swallowing comes later."

Her sharp intake of breath tells me she understood the innuendo, but her tongue wraps around my finger, and laps at it while her lips seal themselves around it. There's a slight pressure as she sucks, as though through a straw, and pulls it deeper into her mouth.

I brush my cheek against her hair. "Good girl."

She trembles. I smile, pull my finger from between her lips until she lets go with an audible *pop*, and step back.

"One minute to go, Kitten. You've done well. Get ready to play again."

CHAPTER 37

ARABELLA

“Good girl.” The voice is a rough whisper. “One minute to go, Kitten. You’ve done well. Get ready to play again.”

The aroma of peppermint teases my nose. Just a hint of it on his breath.

Warmth engulfs me at the praise and the nickname. Swallowing hard, my lips are still tingling from his touch. The sensation of the finger I’d sucked still in my mouth. I shiver, aware of how close he is, even if I can’t see him.

This isn’t just a piece of paper tucked in my locker anymore. There’s a living, breathing person standing in front of me. A voice to go with the dares. The reality of it crashes through me, and I freeze in place. A mass of feelings are in my stomach, a mix of fear and adrenaline. Shifting on the bench, I’m aware of the wetness in my panties and the throbbing in my groin.

He could do anything he wants to me. I’m sitting here blind, away from the school, in the middle of the night. The knowledge is both scary and arousing.

He touched me. Who is he? I don’t recognize the voice. Why am I so turned on? What the hell is wrong with me? I don’t even know what he looks like. I should be running back to the school without looking back.

Yet even knowing all that, I’m held spellbound by his whisper.

I hold my breath and listen closely. A twig snaps to my right, and then everything goes silent.

Is he gone?

My phone alarm chirps, making me jump. “Shit.”

I rip off the blindfold, reach for it and end the sound before it can draw unwanted attention. I scan the darkness but see no signs of anyone.

What now?

My silent question is answered when I spot the small black box next to me on the bench. Using the flashlight function on my phone, I use it to give me a little more light. I take off the lid and examine the inside of the box.

A cheap-looking phone and charger are nestled at the bottom, and a note has been tucked in between them. I take it out and read the message waiting for me.

Turn on the phone.

I lift the device out of the box, it takes me a second to find the on button. As the screen springs to life, a text message appears.

Unknown number: Green to continue. Red to stop. Say your answer out loud now.

Oh, god, what do I do? He's waiting for my answer. It's not like he's done anything bad to me. I can stop anytime I want. I'm in control, even if he's the one giving the instruction.

The pressure to answer grows as the seconds tick by.

"Green," I call out into the dark, caving to the need to see where all this goes.

A beat later, the phone in my hand vibrates.

Unknown number: Keep this cell with you at all times. Good night, Kitten.

I stuff the new phone, my old one, and the note into my fanny pack, add the blindfold and then zip it up.

I rise from the bench. "Good night."

There's no reply to my soft call.

I pick my way along the path in the dark, and I don't stop until I can see the security lights casting the building in a shadowy white glow. A quick check to make sure there's no one watching, I sprint across the grass toward my dorm. It doesn't take long for me to slip inside and up to my room.

When I enter my room, closing the door behind me, I'm caught off guard by the bedside lamp that snaps on.

"Where have you been?"

Flushing, I meet my roommate's questioning stare. "I—I went for a walk."

Lacy arches an eyebrow. "After curfew?"

"I couldn't sleep." I try not to cringe at the excuse.

Her expression softens. "You went out to see Miles, didn't you?"

My laugh sounds fake to my own ears. "Am I that obvious?"

"I've done it plenty of times to see Brad. Just be careful. Security isn't very forgiving if they catch you."

"I will. I promise." I kick off my sneakers. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"It's fine. I was reading a book," Lacy waves one of her romance novels at me. "But lights-out kind of makes that difficult."

I grab the cotton shorts and baggy t-shirt I use to sleep in and carry them to the bathroom. "I won't be long. You can turn out the light."

The second I'm in the bathroom with the door locked, I unzip my bag and find the new phone and the note. There are no more messages waiting for me. I leave it on the side of the sink. Tomorrow morning, I'll take it with me to class. The note that came with it will find a place in my little jewelry box with all the other dares.

What will tomorrow bring? Will I get another dare, or will he make me wait?

I close my eyes and try to recall the sound of his voice.

"Good girl. One minute to go, Kitten. You've done well. Get ready to play again."

Quivering, all I can think about is what he might have in store for me next.

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CHAPTER 38

ELI

“What the fuck?” Kellan meets me in front of the bench once we’re sure Arabella isn’t going to turn around and come back. “You were supposed to drop the box and leave, not have a full conversation with her. What were you thinking?”

It’s a good question. What had I been thinking? She could have removed the blindfold at any time. She could have recognized my voice. Despite myself, I’m intrigued that she didn’t do either of those things. It’s almost as though she *needs* to play this game.

Reading her diary has given me a little insight into her innermost thoughts, her desires, and her desperate need for affection from her mom. I’ve read it from cover to cover more than once. And every single time I discover something new, something I missed on my first readthrough. I’m still confident that she knew her mom planned to get my dad to marry her. That she was aware of my dad’s money and status. I still believe that she is as money hungry as her mom, but I think her motives are very different.

Her diary suggests she longs for security. Money will give her that. A home that isn’t going to be snatched away. Bills paid on time. No worries about losing gas or electricity. No more picking the cheapest option at the grocery store just to make sure there’s enough food to eat until the next paycheck.

I get it. I understand the drive behind it. It doesn’t mean I’m going to allow it to continue, though. I’m still going to ensure neither she nor her mother get their fingers on the money my father has. But my focus has changed, evolved.

My intention is still to drive her away, run her off, send her scurrying from the school with her tail between her legs. I don’t want her here. She distracts me and I don’t like it. But now I want to savor it. I want to take my time instead of scaring her into begging her mom to take her away.

Standing in front of the bench, I can still feel her lips around my finger, the warm wet lick of her tongue. Her soft, quick breaths as she tried not to show her fear and excitement ... and I want more of it.

“Eli?” Kellan’s snapped word brings my attention back to him.

“What?”

“You didn’t answer me.”

I frown, trying to recall what he’d said, then I nod. “I wanted to see how much she wants to play.”

“She was giving your finger a blowjob.” His voice was dry. “I think you got your answer.”

I pull off my ski mask and laugh quietly. “I did. She needs more practice before I let her mouth anywhere near my dick.”

Kellan snorts. “You think she’s going to get on her knees for you?”

“I think she’s going to do a lot of things for me. You heard her. Her acceptance was clear. Even after I stood here and had her blow my finger like it was my dick. There was barely any hesitation. She wants what I’m giving her.” I shrug, turning to set off back to the school. “I’m just performing a public service at this point.”

“A public service?”

“Sure. Who knows what trouble she’d get into trying to get her kicks and relieve the itch she writes about in her diary if I wasn’t supplying her with an outlet.” I throw a sidelong glance at Kellan. “Someone might take advantage of her. The way I see it, I’m doing her a favor.”

Kellan shakes his head, shoulders moving with his laughter. “Not sure she’ll see it the same way.”

“Not sure I care.”

I care.

The idea of her dropping to her knees for someone else makes my jaw clench. I want to become the center of her existence, her sole reason for getting through the day. I want to be on her mind every second until sucking my dick, and making me come, is all she can think about. And then, when she’s in so deep with me that she can’t climb out, I’ll bring the world crashing down around her ears.

We make the rest of the trip back to our room in silence, creeping through the tunnels until we reach the exit inside our building. Once we’re back in our room, I lock the door and turn to face Kellan.

“Let’s see what our cameras caught.”

“I got a really good shot of her mouth around your finger.” He pulls out his cell and taps around the screen, then turns it to face me.

We both watch as the scene plays out. Kellan pauses just as I pull my finger free from between her lips.

“Did you see how she was squirming on that bench? She either desperately wanted to pee, or she wanted to come.”

A smile slowly spreads across my face. “Let’s find out.” I pull out the second burner phone I’d picked up and power it up.

Me: When you were sitting on the bench, sucking on my finger, were you wet, Kitten?

Her reply came through seconds later. I wonder if she’s got the cell close by. Did she expect to hear from me so soon?

Prey: Who are you?

I roll my eyes. So predictable. I don’t reply to that, and just repeat my previous question. The response is almost immediate.

Prey: Yes.

Me: Good girl. What are you going to do about it?

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CHAPTER 39

ARABELLA

The buzz of the phone by the sink makes my stomach jolt.

Unknown number: Good girl. What are you going to do about it?

My gaze darts to the locked bathroom door and then back to the message on the screen. A challenge. Because I know that's exactly what it is. I hadn't been expecting another dare tonight.

No one can see me here. It's safe. I just have to keep quiet. Lacy won't know. She's probably asleep already.

Chewing on my lower lip, I type my reply.

Me: I'm going to make myself come.

Barely a minute passes before a second message flashes up.

Unknown number: I like your honesty. You have three minutes to get yourself off, starting now.

Placing the phone back down on the side of the sink, I perch on the edge of the bathtub, my legs spread. My fingers crawl down past the waistband of my cotton shorts and panties. The tips of my fingers encounter my slickness, and I shudder at how wet I am. There's a pulsing ache inside me that only gets stronger.

I close my eyes, and let my thoughts return to the bench.

The man is close. I can sense him. His hot breath on my cheek, his heat close to my body. Instead of walking away, he slides a gloved hand up my thigh to roughly push my legs apart.

Rubbing my clit with my fingers, I let the fantasy take flight. It's his hands on me. His fingers teasing me, thrusting in and out.

My skin tingles, and I'm hyper-aware of how heavy my breasts feel. The way my nipples brush against the fabric of my t-shirt. Cupping one with my free hand through the fabric, I twist my nipple sharply. A low moan escapes my lips, and I clamp my mouth closed to swallow down the rest.

Shh, you don't want us to get caught, do you, Kitten? He whispers in my head. *Or is being watched something you like? You're not a good girl at all, are you? You're a dirty girl.*

He has me pinned to the bench now, the weight of his body on top of me. I can't move. His hand squeezes around my throat while his fingers continue

to pump in and out of me.

My pussy clenches, my breath hitches, and an orgasm hits me hard. Shaking and panting, I stroke myself until the last ebb of pleasure dies.

I open my eyes, rise from the side of the tub, and wash my hands in the sink before drying them, then check my phone. I still have a minute to spare.

I shoot off a message.

Me: Done.

Unknown number: What were you thinking about while you were touching yourself?

Me: You.

Unknown number: I want details, Kitten. If we're playing, then there's no holding back on your end.

An echoing throb in my groin leaves me with an unfamiliar, needy ache. Hands trembling, I give him my answer.

Me: I imagined I was still on the bench, alone in the dark. You had your gloved hand wrapped around my throat and your other hand between my legs.

Unknown number: In your fantasy, were you still wearing the blindfold?

Me: Yes.

Unknown number: Did I say anything to you?

My stomach does a somersault at the question.

Me: You told me to keep quiet when I moaned so we wouldn't get caught by anyone. You said I was a dirty girl.

"Arabella, are you okay in there?" Lacy calls.

I jump and clutch the phone to my chest in panic.

"Yes. I'm just coming." The second the words fly out of my mouth, I cringe.

Oh, God, why did I just say that? Has she guessed what I'm doing?

I set the phone to mute, and snatch up my discarded clothes, scrunching them into a ball. Unlocking the door with my free hand, I step out into the room, and cross the room in the dark toward my bed. The second my leg meets the mattress, I dump the clothes onto the floor, crawl under the blanket, and pull it over my head, so I can check the phone without Lacy seeing me.

Unknown number: Did you like the thought of getting caught? I already know you like being watched. Did it make you wet?

I nibble on my lip while I reply.

Me: Yes, I liked it.

Unknown number: It's late. You've been such a good girl and should get some sleep. We'll play again soon, Kitten.

I leave the phone on and hide it under my pillow. I'm in control of this, even if the rest of my life is a mess. Heat spreads through me at the thought of the fantasy I've just shared. Something close to what I'd written in my diary.

My diary.

I still don't know where it is, and I'm hesitant to ask Elena. I'll have to search for it when we go back to the house on break.

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CHAPTER 40

ELI

I wake up with my hand on my dick, and the image of Arabella getting herself off in my head. The fact that I'm hard because of *her* makes me so fucking angry. Ignoring the fact my dick is screaming at me for release, I snatch my hand away and roll off the bed.

The burner cell is on my nightstand, and I grab it on my way to the bathroom, thumbing through the messages from the night before. The more I read, the hotter my anger burns. The fantasy she typed out makes it clear that Arabella is no innocent caught up in her mother's machinations. No one as sweet and innocent as she behaved would *ever* spill such dirty detailed fantasies to a stranger.

And, oh, what a fantasy it is.

It makes me question whether she recognized my voice and is guessing the kind of thing I'd like to hear. My hand strokes over my dick again.

The stream of piss I'd directed into the toilet misses the bowl and splashes back against my leg.

"Fuck."

I spin toward the shower, toss the cell on top of the towels folded neatly on the countertop, and strip out of my shorts, then push open the sliding door. When the cold spray hits my skin, it jolts my mind away from thoughts of Arabella with her fingers buried inside her pussy and turns my thoughts to the day ahead.

Most of the senior students will be heading into the nearby town for their first weekend pass off the school grounds. As long as we're back by seven pm on both days, we are free to do as we please.

My plan is to go to the private locker I have in the post office and check for any parcels that might be waiting for me. Other than that, I have no real desire to spend time off-site.

"Eli?" Kellan banging on the bathroom door disrupts my thoughts. "Stop jerking off in there. I need to piss."

I don't answer him, finish washing, then step out of the shower and dry off. Grabbing the cell, I wrap the towel around my waist and walk back out into the bedroom. Kellan gives a low wolf whistle as I pass.

“Why, Mr. Travers!” He slaps a hand to his chest, puts on a fake southern accent and flutters his eyelashes at me. “Have you been working out, sir? You look positively divine!”

I ignore him and rummage through my dresser for a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, and a few seconds later, I hear the bathroom door click shut.

I’m dressed and pulling on my sneakers by the time he comes back out.

“I’m going for a run. You coming?”

He flops onto his bed. “Fuck, no. I’m going to lie here and look pretty.”

“Who for?”

“Myself, of course. Come and get me when you’re done, and we’ll go for breakfast before heading to town.” He lifts his head off the pillow. “You’re driving, right?”

“Where’s your car?”

He waves a hand toward the window. “Oh, at least a mile further from the school than yours.”

“A mile?” I repeat, my voice dry.

He huffs. “Fine. It’s parked next to yours. I just don’t want to drive.”

‘Johnny Wants To Fight’ by Badflower is loud in my ears as I pound along the path through the woods.

It’s early, and there’s mist rising from the ground, giving the whole area an almost ethereal feel. The stillness around me, the music in my ears, and the repetitive action of putting one foot in front of the other sends me into a meditative state, and I’m almost on top of the girl ahead of me before I spot her.

Her blonde hair is up in a high ponytail, and it swings back and forth as she jogs ahead of me. I manage to pull my speed before I crash into her and drop back a few yards. She hasn’t noticed me, and I slow to a walk until there’s a bigger gap between us before picking up speed. I measure my pace to hers, my eyes on her back. When the bench appears ahead, her jog turns into a slow walk until she stops in front of it.

I could jog past her, or I could stop. I’m tempted, I have to admit. It’s not dark, but we’re here alone. My dick stirs and so does my anger, and I’ve stopped before I realize I’ve made the decision. I’m behind her, near enough that I can see the light blonde hair that’s come loose from her hairband and the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat.

“Accidents happen to girls who venture into the woods alone.” I don’t know if she’ll hear me. This close behind her, I can see the earbuds in her ears. She jumps. That answers *that* question.

She spins. “Eli!” Her eyes widen, then dart past me.

“You’re out of luck, Princess. There’s no one to hear you scream.”

She takes a step back, and her legs hit the bench. I follow her, crowding into her space until she has no choice but to sit.

“When are you going to get the message and fuck off back to where you came from? You’re not fucking wanted here. You don’t belong.”

Her chin comes up and her chest moves as she sucks in a breath. “I have friends. You’re the one who doesn’t fit in, Eli.”

I smile, and the color drains from her cheeks. “*Friends?* You think they’re your friends?” My laughter echoes through the trees. “Lacy sees you as her pet project. Her new little doll that she can dress and pose in the positions she wants. Jace and the rest of the football team? They just want you on your knees, sucking their dicks. They’re not your *friends*, Princess. They’ll turn on you as soon as you stop performing tricks for them.”

Her throat moves as she swallows. “Is that what happened to Zoey? Did she stop behaving how you wanted her to? Is that why you hurt her?”

My mind blanks at Zoey’s name, and then anger, bitter and hot, surges forward. I have a hand around her throat before I even think about it. Forcing her head back, I shove her against the bench and lean over her.

“If I ever hear her name come out of your mouth again, I’ll break your fucking neck,” I snarl.

Her hands lift to claw at my fingers, and I squeeze, slowly trapping the air in her throat. Her eyes widen, her lips part, and *finally*, fear seeps into her expression.

“Understand this, *Princess*. These are *my* woods. You are not fucking welcome in them, and soon you won’t be welcome at the school either.” I tighten my grip, and she gapes, face turning red as she battles for air. “Stay out of my way, *Arabella*.” I give one final shove, and her head snaps back, hitting the wooden backrest of the bench.

Without another word, I twist away and continue my jog back to the school.

CHAPTER 41

ARABELLA

Fear roaring through my veins, I push off the bench and run in the opposite direction to Eli. I can still feel his fingers around my throat, squeezing the breath from my body. The memory of the hate in his eyes keeps my legs moving until I'm almost clear of the wood.

Oh god, he tried to strangle me.

My heart is thrashing so wildly in my chest. It's as though it's trying to burrow its way out past my ribs. I turn back, and search for any signs of Eli, but the path is empty.

I should have been more aware of my surroundings instead of daydreaming about last night. It's my own fault for getting distracted.

I rub my neck with my palm trying to erase the lingering impression of his hand on my skin. For one brief disturbing moment, I'd felt my body respond as he had choked me. My nipples hardened, and my pussy grew wet. Then fear had taken over.

Anger and disgust twist me up inside, feeding my hate toward him as I hear his words echo in my head.

"Friends? You think they're your friends? Lacy sees you as her pet project. Her new little doll that she can dress and pose in the positions she wants. Jace and the rest of the football team? They just want you on your knees, sucking their dicks. They're not your friends, Princess. They'll turn on you as soon as you stop performing tricks for them."

Something touches my shoulder. I don't give myself time to think. Swinging my arm wildly, my fist connects with something hard. Miles stands there, shock written all over his face, and my fist smashed into his nose.

Dropping my arm, I wince as my knuckles throb in pain, "Oh my god, Miles! I'm sorry!"

"Jesus, Arabella. What was that for?" He brings his hand up to his nose, and his fingers come away with a smear of blood.

"I thought you were Eli."

"What do you mean you thought I was *Eli*?"

My attention darts nervously back to the woods. “He ... he ... crept up on me in the forest.”

Miles stills. “Did he hurt you?”

A tremor runs through my body. “He grabbed me by the neck—”

“You need to report this to security.” He swears under his breath, and wipes at the trickle of blood with his palm again.

“He’s just trying to scare me.”

“Travers is an asshole who needs to be taken down.”

I shake my head. “If I report this, everyone will learn who I am.”

“You know it’s not going to stay a secret forever,” Miles points out gently.

I lift a shoulder, a tiny part of me hoping that won’t come for a long time yet. “I know. Can we head back to the dorms? Why were you looking for me?”

Miles falls into step beside me, still touching his nose gingerly. “I’ve been texting you, but you didn’t answer. Lacy said you went for your run, so I came to check on you. I was wondering if you wanted to come into town with me?”

Unzipping my fanny pack, I check my phone and resist the urge to pull out my new one. “Shit, I’m sorry. I had it on mute. And yes, I’d love to go into town with you. I just need to shower and change.”

Miles tosses a glance over his shoulder. “Maybe you should stick to the running track from now on.”

Can he see Eli? I refuse to give him any more of my fear. He’s nothing but a bully that no one likes.

“I like running through the trees.” I fight against the desire to look back, and keep my gaze locked on the buildings in front of us. “I’ll just be a little more aware next time.”

Attention on the people wandering up and down the street beyond the window, I take my first sip of coffee. The air of the cafe is swirling with the aromatic scent of hot drinks and freshly baked pastries. Tucked away in a nook, Miles and I have the perfect view of everyone who enters.

We’ve spent the last few hours going in and out of shops. Miles even talked me into using the credit card Elliot gave me. I loathed spending my stepfather’s money, I’d rather earn it, but as my new friend pointed out, that isn’t going to happen while I’m at school.

"I'll pay him back," I vow.

"Are you still worried about using your credit card?"

"It just doesn't seem right."

"Your stepdad wouldn't have given it to you, if he didn't want you to be able to buy yourself stuff."

I toy with the handle of my cup. "I guess."

"And it's not like you went crazy."

I spare a glance at the two bags at my feet. It's just a few t-shirts, more underwear, a pretty pink hoodie, and a new diary.

Sexy underwear, in case I'm expected to part with some more, but I have no idea what my next dare will be.

I check my new phone, without taking it out of my bag, but there are still no messages.

Maybe he's out enjoying his weekend. Or maybe he's just coming up with something for me to do next? Why is it so hard to wait?

Miles reaches into the red bag on the seat beside him. "I got you something."

He pulls something out on a long white cord. "A whistle?"

"You can wear it when you go running. I've also ordered this." He picks up his phone and taps on it. "It should arrive tomorrow."

I gape down at the screen when he shows me a webpage. "A mini rechargeable stun gun with light?"

"Next time Eli tries to grab you, stick this in his balls and light him up."

"Eew, I am not touching his balls."

Miles smirks. "I bet Kellan does."

"You think they're a couple?"

"It wouldn't surprise me. I've seen the way Kellan watches Eli. That's more than 'just' friends. He's probably down on his knees sucking Travers' cock before lights-out every evening."

Is Eli gay? I guess that would explain why Lacy said he's never had a girlfriend at the school. Maybe he and Kellan are dating? They share a room. No one really knows what's going on behind closed doors.

My gaze moves back to the window, and a familiar face captures my attention.

Tearing my gaze away, I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, pretending I haven't seen her. "Tina is watching us."

"Where?"

Miles goes to look, but I grab his hand to stop him. “Across the street. I think you should kiss me.”

“Got to keep up the pretense, right?” Miles leans in, pressing his lips to mine, the kiss quick and clumsy. “Is she still there?”

“She’s leaving and already on her phone,” I track her movements, tension zipping up my spine when I see Eli.

He’s standing outside a shop, with Kellan chatting away beside him. His gaze is locked on me. The icy, coldness in his expression makes my mouth go dry. Like a flip has been switched, all the unsettled emotions he caused me this morning come flooding back. I recall his rage when I asked about Lacy’s old roommate Zoey. How his expression transformed into something terrifying and ugly.

“Are you okay?” Miles follows the direction I’m staring. “Fuck.”

He curls his arm around my shoulders like a defensive shield, and pulls me into his chest. I don’t resist, soaking in the support.

I turn my head away, breaking the connection with Eli and focus on the surface of our table instead. “I’m fine, and I’m not going to let that asshole ruin the rest of my day.”

Miles squeezes me gently, his lips brushing my forehead. “That’s the spirit. Don’t let him intimidate you, and if he tries anything again when you go running, zap him until he can sing soprano.”

CHAPTER 42

ELI

“She really likes PDAs.” Kellan nudges me, and I turn my head to see Arabella in a lip lock with Miles.

Something churns in my gut, and I squash it down just as her gaze connects with me. I don’t even pretend to hide my disgust. Just last night, she was detailing a fantasy involving a stranger, and now she’s over there sharing sloppy kisses with a fucking jock. It proves, once again, that she is like her mother. A chameleon. Becoming whatever her latest lover wants to ensure she gets what *she* wants. Judging by the bags at her feet, he’s already throwing money at her.

When Miles distracts her, I pull out the burner from my pocket.

Me: Stop whatever you’re doing, find the nearest restroom and take off your panties. Take them to the bench before dinner and leave them there. Stay bare for the rest of the day. Green or red, Kitten?

I hit send.

“Let’s go and see if I have any packages before the post office shuts.”

“Are you expecting anything? What did you buy?”

“Tools.” I grin at his raised eyebrow and answer his unvoiced question. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

He shakes his head. “What’s your plan for her?”

“She told us what gets her off. Tonight, we test it.” I wave a hand back toward the cafe she’s sitting in. “I want to see how far she’ll go while her boyfriend is tucked up in bed asleep.”

“I thought the idea was to drive her away.” Kellan keeps pace beside me as I walk along the high street.

“It is.” I ignore the little whisper inside my head, which tells me that there would be far easier ways to scare her away.

“Funny, because she doesn’t seem to be running, Eli.”

“We’re only just getting started.” And I want more of her gasps. I want more of her fear. I want more of ... *everything*.

The delivery lockers are at the back of the post office, and we head straight to them, where I fish out the key from a pocket and unlock it.

There's a neat stack of boxes inside. I take them out and pile Kellan up with them.

"Why am I carrying everything?"

"Because I'm driving."

"Not right now, you're not." He nudges me with his elbow. "What the fuck did you buy? This shit is heavy."

"Stop whining. Most of it is for my art project. New tools. Some of it ... *isn't*. I'll take it from you once I've locked up."

I close the locker and turn the key, then take half of the boxes from Kellan. "Let's go."

I check the burner once we're back in our dorm. There's a one-word reply from Arabella.

Prey: Green.

The response makes me smile. I wonder how she managed to make it work and how she feels, walking around town with no panties on. I couldn't see from where I stood whether she was wearing pants or a skirt. I guessed pants. She hasn't worn a skirt since the last time I told her to go bare. I make a mental note to turn it into a regular thing. I like the thought of her being uncovered. I know from her diary she has an exhibitionist streak and I'm sure I can build on it.

"Are you going to show me what you bought?" Kellan distracts me from my thoughts, and I look up.

"I told you. Tools for my art project."

"And?"

I toss him a box and wait while he tears it open and pulls out a delicate lace bra and panty set. His eyes lift to find mine.

"I'm flattered but dusky pink isn't my color, and I'm pretty confident these won't even fit over my thighs." He holds up the panties, dangling them off one finger.

"I thought you were a commando kind of guy."

He leans back on his bed and hooks a thumb into the waistband of his sweats so he can pull them forward, and peers down. "You're right. I am. Easy access and all that." Dropping the lingerie back into the box, he reaches for another. "What else have you got?"

"A selection of things that match up with the stuff in her diary. Lacy wants to turn Arabella into her pet project, but at night ..." My lips curve

up. “She’s going to be mine to play with.”

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CHAPTER 43

ARABELLA

“The others have agreed to you trying out for the team tomorrow,” Lacy calls through the open bathroom door. “As it’s a Sunday, we’ll have plenty of time after breakfast.”

“Great, I can’t wait.”

A second later, her head appears around the door, toothbrush hovering in front of her mouth. “You totally don’t have to be nervous. I’m confident you’ll do fine.”

I sigh heavily and drape my forearm over my eyes.

What’s the worst that can happen? I suck, and don’t make the team. And if I do make the cheer squad, I’ll have to spend more time with Tina. She already doesn’t seem to like me.

My phone vibrates beneath the pillow where I have it hidden.

I make sure Lacy is back in the bathroom before I reach for it.

Unknown number: Come to the bench an hour after curfew. Sit down and put the blindfold on, then wait.

Back to the bench? I used my run before dinner to leave my panties on it. Getting the dare in town had sent a little thrill down my spine. No one knew I was bare beneath my leggings while Miles and I continued to shop.

What does he want me to do now? Curfew is in thirty minutes.

Pressing my legs together, I can already feel the crotch of my leggings getting wet.

Me: Green.

Lacy emerges from the bathroom just as I shove the phone back under the pillow. Cheeks heating at the thought of getting caught with it, I eye the black dress she’s wearing.

“Where are you going?”

She crouches to tug a pair of ballet flats from under her bed. “Brad’s roommate is away visiting his family for the weekend.”

“You’re spending tonight with him?”

Lacy’s grin is blinding as she slips the shoes on. “Exactly. I’ll see you tomorrow at breakfast.”

The thought of being able to get out of the dorms without her catching me makes me smile back. "Have fun."

"I will." She moves to the door and leaves.

The second she's gone, my hand creeps back to the phone. I reread the message over and over with anticipation. There's no mention of me putting panties back on. Rising from the mattress, I open the drawers of my dresser, and select a dark gray pair of joggers. I match it with a black t-shirt.

I'd made sure on my shopping trip to pick up more clothes in darker colors. Anything to help me blend in when I sneak out at night. I look at the new hoodies. Pink would be easily seen, so I choose the black one.

I take a quick shower, wash my hair and then dress.

It feels strange not wearing panties, but I'm starting to get used to the sensation. A glance at the time tells me I need to get moving. I snatch up my fanny pack, snap it into place around my waist and stuff the phone inside. The blindfold is already stored in the bottom.

Muffled noises emanate from some of the rooms as I pass them by. My stomach churns with nerves, and I search for movement the second I'm outside. A cool breeze ruffles my hair, but I see no signs of life.

He has this timed to match with the security's routine. How many times has he done this before?

I frown at the niggling thought, but I push it aside.

Taking off across the grass, adrenaline races through me as I race toward the trees. By the time I've passed through them, I'm breathing heavily, but a quick look over my shoulder assures me I'm still alone.

He must get here ahead of me, or maybe he takes another route around the buildings?

I take a deep breath and follow the path toward the cemetery. My gaze darts to the undergrowth when it rustles.

Rabbits? Maybe a raccoon? What else could be out there?

A frisson of excitement tingles down my spine when the bench comes into view.

"I'm here," I call out softly.

Silence.

Unzipping my fanny pack, I check the phone, but there are no messages. I place the pack and cell on the bench and tug out the blindfold. I rub my thumbs over the material, then take a seat before putting it on.

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CHAPTER 44

ELI

I don't approach her straight away, giving her time to settle on the bench. Instead, I study her, my gaze noting her straight back, the way her hands are tucked between her thighs, how her t-shirt moves with every intake of breath. Her hair is up in a ponytail. It seems to be her standard hairstyle, and my fingers curl into my palm, imagining it wrapped around them.

During the day, she's an unwanted annoyance in my life, my family, but something changes at night. I don't view her as the daughter of a gold-digger when she's perched on the bench waiting for me to send her instructions. She's something else. But what?

A toy? A pet?

No, a distraction. My anger with her disappears with the setting sun, leaving only a desire to push her limits, and test her boundaries. And I fully intend to push her tonight.

Stooping, I pick up the box at my feet and step out of the trees. I make no attempt to conceal my approach and her head raises when my foot steps on a twig, snapping it in two. She stops breathing, head swinging from side to side as she attempts to listen, to figure out what direction I'm coming from.

"Are you there?" Her voice shakes, but she holds her head up.

I reach out to brush my fingertips over her lips, and bend to place my lips next to her ear.

"Answer a question for me," I whisper. "Were you a good girl today, Kitten?"

Her response is a quick nod.

"Use your words. Did you do as I asked?"

"I ..." She clears her throat. "I did."

"Did it excite you?"

Small white teeth bite down on her bottom lip.

"Did it make you wet? Needy?" I lick the outer edge of her ear, and she jumps. "Did your *boyfriend* get to enjoy your hungry pussy?"

Her gasp is loud. "No. I didn't ... He didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"I didn't tell him."

“He didn’t know you were walking around with your pussy dripping?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She shakes her head again. I tap her cheek gently with my palm. “I don’t like silence. Words, Kitten. Always words. Why didn’t your boyfriend know? He kissed you today. In public.”

“You ...” Her throat moves as she swallows. “You saw that?”

“I see *everything* you do.”

Her breath is coming in small gasps. I straighten. “I brought you a gift. I want you to stand up.”

I take a step back and wait while she pushes to her feet.

“Good girl. Turn around. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

She shuffles around carefully and when she’s facing the bench, I touch her arm. “Perfect. In front of you is a box. Count to ten, then remove your blindfold. If you want to play some more, change into what’s in that box. *Nothing else*. Then put the blindfold back on.”

I move back as she counts slowly down from ten. By the time she hits zero, I’m hidden by the trees. I wonder what she’s thinking as she opens the box and pulls out the underwear Kellan admired earlier. She glances around.

Safely out of sight—we checked earlier to make sure the light from my cell wouldn’t be seen if I took it out—I tap out a text.

Me: Green or red?

She must have her cell on vibrate because I don’t hear a notification, but she pulls it out of the bag on the bench and sends a reply.

Prey: Green, I think. Are you alone?

Me: Do you trust me?

She hesitates and then replies.

Prey: I think so.

Me: Then be a good girl and do as I say.

She places the cell beside the box on the bench, takes another look around and then hooks her fingers into the hem of her hoodie and pulls it over her head. She’s wearing a t-shirt beneath it and there’s another hesitation before that is dragged off as well, leaving her in a bra that may be black. It’s hard to say without being closer. Her skin is a pale splash in the darkness. Her hands reach back to unhook her bra and I send another message.

Me: Wait. Turn around first. Let the bra drop down your arms to the ground. DO NOT cover yourself. Stand for thirty seconds. Count out loud. Red or green?

She stares down at the message, and I wonder if this is it. Have I pushed her too far? Is the game over already? But then her reply comes through.

Prey: Green.

She picks up the bra, sets down the cell and slowly turns to face away from the bench. I'm directly in front of her, even though she can't see me. She's worrying at her bottom lip, but she reaches back and unhooks her bra, then lets her arms fall to her sides. The bra slips off her shoulders, down her arms, peels away from her breasts and keeps falling down her wrists, her hands, and then it's free, landing on the ground in front of her.

It's my turn to lick my lips as she slowly starts to count. Her voice is low, barely more than a whisper, and her fingers are tucked into her palms, in tight little fists. With every number, her breasts lift as she breathes in and out. I wish I was closer. She's visible, but not enough. I want to see what color her nipples are. Are they dark pink? Light pink? Small, large? Soft or hard?

By the time she reaches twenty, the numbers are spilling out of her mouth faster and faster in her haste to get to thirty. As soon as she hits it, she pulls on the new bra, and snaps it closed.

Me: Good girl. Now the sweats. We'll talk about how that wasn't thirty seconds another time.

She snatches up the cell, reads the message and types out a reply.

Prey: Can I face the bench?

Me: No.

Prey: But I don't have any panties on.

Me: Good. Get used to it. You're going to spend a lot of time that way. Unless you're choosing red this time?

Prey: What if I do?

She better fucking not. I jab at the letters on my cell.

Me: Then the game is over, and you won't hear from me again. Take off your sweats. Show me what you played with last night, then put on the panties. Or choose red, get dressed, put the cell on the bench and walk away.

I'm taking a risk, goading her, but I think I know how her mind works well enough by now to be confident in the choice she's going to make.

She doesn't move, doesn't reply.

Me: Green or red, Kitten. Choose now.

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CHAPTER 45

ARABELLA

Unknown number: Green or red, Kitten. Choose now.

My brain is frozen, and I can't think beyond the pounding of my heart. I stare so hard down at the screen that it starts to blur before my eyes. Raising my head, I cast a glance around but see no one in the darkness.

How far away is he? It can't be that close. How much of me can he see?

The last thought has the crotch of my sweats soaked and my stomach heaves with nerves.

He's been watching me. Is it someone in my class? Another student or maybe a teacher? Could it be a security guy?

My attention darts back to the message on the screen. He wants an answer now.

Do I continue to play or stop? If I don't do this, he's going to walk away from the dares.

My hands feel clammy.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since I heard his voice. Why not do it this once? Feed that little giddy whoosh of excitement that has me shaking. I can do it quickly. He didn't put a time limit.

Licking my lips, I type my reply.

Me: Green.

Unknown number: Good girl.

My whole body flushes with warmth at the praise, and I almost drop the phone as I put it back on the bench. Biting my lip so hard it hurts, I toe out of my sneakers and peek around. Nothing stirs.

I can do this. I can do this. God, this is so embarrassing. I just have to be fast.

I count silently to ten before shoving my sweats down. Cool air rushes over my skin, sending goosebumps in its wake. There's no finesse as I strip and tug them off my feet. My cheeks are on fire with embarrassment as the breeze tickles the sensitive flesh between my legs.

I face the direction he asked for a whole forty seconds, exposed and vulnerable, before I turn my back.

I feel around in the box, fist a piece of material and hold it up. In jerky movements, I bend, scrambling into the panties. They feel nice, the fabric caressing my skin, unlike the cheap cotton pairs I usually buy.

My phone vibrates on the bench, and I check it for messages.

Unknown number: That wasn't much of a show, Kitten. You disappoint me.

Me: I'm sorry. I was nervous.

A lump wedges in my throat at his disapproval. I don't want him to be angry with me. I've done what he asked. I've never been naked in front of anyone before. I'm tempted to type that truth to let him know, but I can't. Miles and I are fake dating. It wouldn't be right to give away that secret. I've made a promise and I need to keep it to my friend.

Unknown number: Next time you'll do better. Sit down and put your blindfold on.

Sitting back down, I place the phone beside me. The wood of the bench is cold as it presses into the backs of my thighs. I shift at the discomfort and pluck the blindfold up from where I left it. I scan the dark around me again before slipping the material over my eyes. My other senses take over. The panties I'm wearing are already wet with my arousal. I can feel my nipples harden in the snug lace of the bra. Spine straight, I remain still, listening to the sounds around me.

A rustle comes from my left. Moving my head in the same direction, I strain my ears for any more noise. Something brushes against my shoulder, and I jump.

"Are you still nervous?" the voice whispers close to my ear.

I exhale sharply. "You scared me."

Fingers trail down the side of my neck. I tremble.

"Do you want to continue playing tonight, Kitten? Green or red."

I clasp my hands in my lap trying not to fidget. "Green."

CHAPTER 46

ELI

I pull the gloves out of the waistband of my sweats and tug them on. I want to keep my fingers on her skin, but she specifically mentioned gloves in her texts *and* her diary, and I want to keep her in the mindset of this being her fantasy.

Once the gloves are snug, I press my fingers against her throat.

“How does it feel sitting out here, with just a scrap of lace covering you?”

“Cold.”

My fingers slide up the column of her throat until I can grip her chin. “Your skin is flushed, and your breathing is rapid. Are you sure you want to go with cold as your answer?”

Her tongue touches her top lip, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I can feel the heat of your skin through my glove. If I pushed one finger inside your panties, would you make it wet, I wonder? Would you soak through my glove?”

Her breath hitches.

“Is that what you want, Kitten?” I trail my fingers down her throat, over her shoulder, and drag the bra strap down her arm, while I lift the other hand to motion Kellan to come out of his hiding place.

He reaches me without making any noise, and I point to her other strap. He reaches out and strokes a finger over it before hooking a finger beneath it and pulling it down.

“Stand up, Kitten, and put your hands behind your back.” We both take a step back as she rises. “Stand straight, push your shoulders back. Head up high.” The position thrusts her breasts forward, almost spilling out of the bra. Her bra straps hang loose against her arms. One more tug and her breasts will come free of the material concealing them.

I reach out and follow the path of the lace over her breasts with a finger, dipping down into the valley between them, and slowly pull it down. “Green or red?”

Her whispered “green” comes a second before the lace falls away from her nipples. They’re hard, pointed, tilted slightly upwards, and

mouthwateringly close. I lift my cell and take a photograph of her.

“What would your boyfriend say if he knew you were standing out here? Half-naked, showing your body to a stranger. Getting wet for him?” I pinch her nipple and her gasp makes my dick hard. “Letting him touch you? That’s what you want, isn’t it? For me to touch you?”

Kellan copies my movement, stroking a circle around her nipple before pinching it between thumb and finger.

“You’re only wearing one glove?” Her voice trembles.

She knows the answer already, but I smile and lean forward to lick over her nipple with my tongue. “No. I’m wearing two gloves.”

But—” The word stops on a gasp as I close my teeth over one nipple just as Kellan sucks the other into his mouth. Her hands land on our shoulders, but instead of pushing us away, her fingers curl into our shirts and hold on tight. “Oh ... Green.” The word is a breathy moan.

My hand curves over her hip to hold her steady as we suck and feast on her breasts. This hadn’t been in the plan. I’d just intended on making her strip, of humiliating her by making her stand there naked, scare her when she discovered there were two of us. But the second she did as I demanded, I changed my mind. I wanted to touch her, taste her, make her moan. Easing back, I catch her nipple between my teeth, drag my tongue over the sensitive tip, and bite down gently before letting it go and dropping to my knees.

My hands smooth over her hips, along the elastic of the panties and I rest my head against her stomach, my tongue delving into the dip of her navel and down. Her legs shift, part, and I look up to see Kellan’s hand has covered the breast I’d left, squeezing and pinching while he licks and sucks on the other.

“Do you want my tongue on you, Kitten?”

Her legs widen more. This close, I can see the dampness on the crotch of her panties, smell her arousal. Arabella Gray is a dirty girl, getting off on being groped by strangers in the woods. The thought makes me smile, makes me harder, and I press my mouth against the material that separates me from her pussy.

She doesn’t push me away, doesn’t tell me to stop. I cup her ass and squeeze, then flatten my tongue and lick a path over the lace. A whimper leaves her lips and Kellan chuckles.

“Such a good girl for us,” I whisper and rise to my feet. “Go back to your dorm, Kitten. Stay exactly how you are. Come back for your clothes in the morning. Don’t cover yourself. When you get back to your room, check your messages. I have one more thing for you to do tonight.”

I bend to take her nipple into my mouth once more, licking and sucking at it until her fingers clutch at my arm. My lips kiss a path to the soft underside of her breast, and I suck *hard* until I am certain I’ve left a mark, then I let her go.

Kellan does the same to her other breast, only his mark is higher, above her nipple.

“Something to remember us by.” I take another photograph. “Count to thirty, then take off your blindfold and leave.”

“What if someone sees me?”

“Let them. You’re a good girl, remember, and you want to please me ... don’t you?”

Her throat moves as she swallows, but then she nods. I squeeze her breast.

“Good girl.”

Part of me, the part that wants to punish her for coming into my family, hopes security sees her and reports her to the principal. But there’s another part that wants to keep this going, that wants to bend her over the bench and fuck her. And I’m not sure which side of me I want to win.

CHAPTER 47

ARABELLA

My stomach flips as the fingers around my breast squeeze. I can still feel the heat of their wet mouths on my nipples, against my pussy through the lace of my panties. My legs are weak, and my head spins with overwhelming sensations.

He's not alone.

There's someone else with him.

Why am I standing here letting them touch me?

Memories stir at the back of my mind. Dreams in the dark that left me sweat soaked and panting. Fantasies I've admitted to no one.

A hand gently pushes me back, forcing me to let go of his arm. The sudden loss has a needy little whimper escaping from my throat.

Someone chuckles.

I can't stop shaking, and it's not entirely because of the cold. My body is buzzing and tingling. I remain still, trapped in a daze, my arms feel heavy at my sides.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, breasts bare, breathing raggedly, when I hear the phone vibrate on the bench. I hesitate for a second, before I slip off the blindfold, and pull up the straps of the bra. Once I'm covered, I pick up the phone.

Unknown number: Time's up, Kitten. Remember to leave your clothes there and go back to the dorm as you are.

The sudden weight in my chest is so heavy it almost hurts to breathe as I reply to his instructions.

Me: I'll need my bag as it has my key and my shoes.

A second later, he gives me his answer.

Unknown number: Take the bag and go barefoot.

My pulse picks up again.

Me: That's not fair.

Unknown number: Obeying is part of the dare. You want to obey, don't you, Kitten? You like doing as you're told. Are you going to continue being my good girl?

My head swims, and a flare of anxiety fades as eagerness to please zips through my veins. Folding my clothes, I leave them in a pile on top of my sneakers under the bench. I clip the fanny pack around my waist and stash the phone in the pouch with the blindfold and zip it up.

Arms wrapped around my upper half for protection against the breeze, I move slowly onto the path. I have to concentrate on where I'm going, my bare feet finding twigs and rocks.

Are they still watching me?

The thought of them stalking me through the woods sends a fresh flood of wetness between my legs.

It feels as though it takes forever before I see the edge of the tree line. The closer I get; the more jittery panic takes over.

What if someone sees me? It's Saturday night. Other students will be sneaking out. I'll die of mortification if I'm seen dressed in nothing but my underwear.

I'm excruciatingly aware of how I'm almost naked and how easy it will be for anyone to see me.

My soles meet the softness of the grass, and I break into a run. I dash toward the building going flat out, arms pumping, and my heart slamming wildly against my ribs.

The entrance hall is empty. Worrying my lower lip with my teeth, heat creeps into my cheeks and spreads down my chest as I head for my room.

Laughter explodes from somewhere further up the hallway. I duck back around the corner, and swallow down my panic. A couple of students are creeping into one of the rooms, too focused on each other to notice me. I wait until they're inside with the door closed before racing along toward my room. The second I get to the door, I unlock it and slip inside.

Pressing my back against the wood, I close my eyes and gasp for breath. I almost got caught. If they'd seen me, I would have been in so much trouble. Legs like jelly, I slide down until I'm sitting on the floor and hugging my knees. I'm a bubbling cauldron of horniness and confusion.

Part of me is angry that they made me walk back to school without my clothes. A stronger part is high on the intensity of the evening.

I wait for my breath to even out and the shaking in my limbs to lessen before I attempt to rise. When I finally do, I head straight for the bathroom.

I switch on the light and turn toward the mirror. My eyes are bright, cheeks flushed. My teeth have made little indents in my lower lip, where

I've been biting it so much.

Reaching behind me, I unclip my bra and let it flutter to the ground. There's a red mark on my right breast and another below the nipple on my left. I touch the higher one with a finger, recalling the surprise and then the pleasure of the pull of his lips as he sucked. It's enough to make me tremble. I graze my fingertip over the tip watching as it pebbles with excitement.

There's a throbbing low in my groin. It hurts so bad, but in a strange, needy way. My fingers drift downward until I'm caressing where his mouth pressed a fiery path over the lace covering my pussy.

I liked his mouth there.

The way his hands had cupped my bottom. The thought of being trapped while they gave me pleasure is arousing. Wetness is still pooled between my legs.

I didn't want them to stop.

The wisp of truth shocks me.

What would they have done if they'd continued? Would they have done what I'd described when I made myself come? Pinned me down? Put their hands between my legs? Toyed with me until I orgasmed?

My fingers rub at the material where my darer touched, pushing it in until I'm stroking my clit through it. Watching my reflection in the mirror, I moan low in my throat.

What would it feel like to have their mouths on me there? No barrier between us? Would it feel better than my fingers?

I want to feel their hands on me again.

Need them all over my skin.

I crave it.

CHAPTER 48

ELI

Unlike Arabella, we don't have to run the gauntlet of being caught by security getting back to our room. As soon as she's gone, we go in the opposite direction and go back through the secret tunnels. Neither of us break the silence until we're back inside, with our door locked. At night, there is no telling how far sound will travel, and we don't want anyone hearing something inside the walls of the dorm building and investigate too deeply.

But the second we're in our room, Kellan turns to look at me.

"What was *that*?"

"What?" I know exactly what he means.

"I just had my mouth all over your stepsister's tits. Not that I'm complaining, you understand, but it wasn't in the plan."

"Plans change."

I can't get the image of her out of my head. The way she looked with the moonlight spilling over her skin, how she'd responded to our mouths on her body. Kellan is right. This wasn't the plan. The plan is to humiliate her. I need to keep that at the forefront of my mind, and not how her skin tasted on my tongue, or how her soft moans woke up my dick. She's an unwelcome addition to my family, working with her mother to take what she can get from my dad.

Someone really needs to tell my dick that.

I rip off my ski mask and throw it on the bed. That's followed by my t-shirt and pants, and I stride across to the bathroom in my underwear.

"Do you want to fuck her, Eli?" Kellan's question stops me.

"No, I want to fuck *with* her."

"Are you lying to me or yourself? There's no shame in wanting her, you know. She's pretty. She's smart." He breaks off to chuckle. "Well, other than sneaking out to strip off for strangers in the dark, anyway. That's not very smart."

"I said no. I'm using what I'm learning about her to set her up to fall, that's all. When she realizes she's been submitting to the one person who hates her more than anyone else, she'll beg my dad to take her out of the

school. And if she doesn't, then the photographs and videos we have can be made public. Those will drive her away, and make my dad see what kind of woman his wife is."

"How does you humiliating her make your dad see his new wife any differently?"

"Who the fuck do you think she's learned this behavior from?"

"And then what? Her mom will still be married to your dad. Fucking with her here doesn't change that."

"But it'll make him question whether the daughter is following in her whore mother's steps. From there, it'll be easy to show him the truth."

"But what is the truth, Eli? You *think* she's trying to dig her claws into your dad's money, but what if she really did fall in love?"

I snort. "Don't be fucking naive."

The first thing I do when I wake up is check the cell I bought. There are no messages from Arabella. That suggests she didn't check her messages when she got back to her dorm, which means she didn't follow my instructions.

I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling as I think about how I should play this. Kellan's words have been spinning in my mind all night long and, as much as I hate to admit it, he's right. I have been behaving like I *do* want to fuck her. More than I want to break her. I've let my dick control my behavior. Today that ends. Today I remind her *why* the entire school fears me.

You're only doing it because she didn't answer your message last night.

The stray thought makes me scowl. It's not true. If I want her to fuck off out of my life, I need to stop making her come, and start making her run.

You're punishing her for playing your game.

I throw a hand over my face and squash down the little voice.

I'm just softening her up, so when I finally make a move it's unexpected.

I don't even believe that.

"Why are you huffing and groaning over there? I can see your hands, so you're not getting yourself off." Kellan's voice intrudes on my thoughts.

I roll my head sideways and look at him. "I'm going for a run, then breakfast. I want to spend today working on my project. What are you doing?"

"Not running, that's for sure. Might do an hour in the gym later, though. Meet you in the cafeteria at eight? Give me your cell so I can set an alarm."

He stretches out a hand.

“That works.” Decision made, I get out of bed, toss him my cell, and head into the bathroom.

I’m washed, dressed, and out of the door before Kellan even gets up.

The campus is quiet. It’s still early and Sunday morning, so most students will laze in their rooms until hunger drives them out. The dew glistens on the grass as I do warm-up stretches before setting off into the woods, my earbuds filling my ears with the raspy tones of Remington Leith from Palaye Royale.

When I reach the bench where Arabella stripped the night before, I stop. Her clothes are still there in a neat little pile, her sneakers tucked beneath it.

I glance around and tap the pause button on my music. I’d been certain she would head out early to grab her things before anyone saw them. I guess I’m out earlier than her. A slow smile pulls my lips up. That suits me just fine. I tuck the bundle of clothes under one arm and pick up the sneakers.

Maybe this is the sign I needed. A reminder of why I started this.

I’m half-tempted to lurk and wait for her to arrive just so I can see her reaction to the missing clothes, but I don’t want to risk being caught. So, instead, I set off for the tomb, where I tuck her clothes and sneakers behind Churchill’s coffin and then continue my run.

The cell in my pocket vibrates against my leg just as I reach the end of the cemetery, and I slow to a walk so I can pull it out to read the text.

Prey: I’m sorry. I forgot to check messages last night.

I scroll up to the message I left her and read it over. I sent her a link to a cloud storage, with a password and asked her to take a photograph of the bites we’d left on her breasts and upload it. She didn’t.

I pocket my cell without replying, only for it to buzz again seconds later.

Prey: I’ve uploaded a photograph.

I still don’t respond, but I do take out my other cell and navigate to the folder to check it out. And sure enough, there’s a photograph waiting for me. She’s standing in her bathroom, topless, her breasts on display with the two bite marks clear against her skin. She’s carefully angled the camera so her head isn’t showing and the bathroom behind her could be any one of the dorms.

It almost tempts me into replying, but I resist, closing the app and turning off the burner cell. She can send all the messages she likes, but she won’t be

hearing from me today.

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CHAPTER 49

ARABELLA

Stomach churning with doubt, my finger hovers over the delete button. The need to appease him stops me from deleting the photo. I've been careful. No one can see my face. Still, the thought of an image of my breasts out there for anyone to see makes me sick with anxiety.

I check the phone again, but there's no answer to my texts.

Is he angry with me?

I forgot to look for a message last night. After I'd made myself come, I curled up in bed and fell asleep. My dreams were filled with shadowy images of the cemetery and masked figures chasing me through the trees.

I glance at the screen of the cell again.

Still nothing.

Me: I'm sorry. I can do better next time.

Minutes tick by, and there's still no reply. I need to go and get my clothes before anyone else finds them. I leave the phone on my bed, and dress quickly. Thankfully I have a second pair of sneakers, so I push my feet into them, pull on my pink hoodie, and stuff both phones and my keys into my pocket.

Dew is beading the grass when I step outside. I flip up my hood and set off toward the trees in a fast walk. Fingers curled tightly around the cell in my pocket, I take another look at it, but there's still nothing from my darer.

Why isn't he answering? Maybe he's still asleep?

Worry plagues me as I hit the woods and follow the path. The tension inside me grows. I make sure I'm alone before I approach the bench. My clothes aren't where I left them. I check behind the nearest trees but find no sign of them.

Did someone take them?

A sense of unease shrouds me.

Me: My clothes are missing. Did you take them? Is this a punishment?

No reply.

Unsure what to do next, I run into the cemetery and hunt for my things but come up empty. My thumb caresses the metal of the butterfly charm on

my bracelet in a soothing rhythm.

I can't stay out here all day. He's either taken them, or someone else found them. If they have, they'll turn them in to a teacher or a member of security. There are no tags or anything to indicate they are mine. The thought of their loss ramps my anxiety higher.

"Welcome to the team," Lacy squeals, throwing her arms around me.

I return her hug back, and try to muster up some excitement, but all I can think about is the phone in my pocket.

Has he texted back yet?

Linda shakes her pom poms in the air. "Go, Roosters."

The coach for the cheerleader squad is talking to her assistant behind us on the field. I'm not sure how I managed to impress them enough to add me to the team.

"We need to start training you tomorrow." Lacy steps back, bouncing with her excitement. "Choreography is the key. Every scrap of free time you have needs to be dedicated to learning our moves."

My eyes widen as I realize the enormity of what I've just taken on. "But I need to study. And I have Mr. McIntyre's art project to do."

Tina snickers. "Already changing your mind about wanting to be one of us?"

"You'll have time for that," Lacy assures me. "We'll make it work. You'll soon be out here with us."

Why did I let Miles talk me into this? Performing in front of hundreds of people is not what introverts do. Oh god, this is going to be my worst nightmare, isn't it? I'll end up puking.

I quell the urge to breathe into my hands and lie down on the grass. "That sounds amazing."

"Nice bracelet. Did a six-year-old make it?"

Gaze lowering at Tina's sneer, it's only then I realize I'm fingering the charms on my bracelet. "My best friend made it for me."

She pulls a face. "Let me guess, she's still in Nowhere, Michigan?"

"For fuck's sake, give it a rest."

Turning at the words, I see Jace walking toward us, with Evan and Brad behind him.

For one brief second, I make eye contact with Jace. We've not really spoken since I started dating Miles. I've caught him looking at me, though.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, tug the phone out of my pocket and check for messages.

Still nothing.

He's ignoring me.

An arm drops over my shoulders. "Is that Miles? Did you tell him you made the squad? Are you texting naughty things?"

I flatten the cell screen to my chest, hide it from Evan's view and push him away. "That's between me and Miles."

He laughs, circling around Brad, who's got his arms around Lacy as he kisses her. "Where is Miles?"

"He had some homework to catch up on." I lie quickly, knowing he's off on a video call with his boyfriend.

"We have half an hour before lunch," Linda announces, interrupting us. "Does anyone have any plans for the afternoon?"

Jace shrugs. "We could always celebrate Arabella getting on the cheer squad by going for a swim in the pool."

"Are we allowed to do that?" Still clutching the phone, I fall into step with the rest of them as we move back toward the dorm.

"Duh, we're allowed to use all the school facilities." Tina flips her hair over her shoulder. "They provide a lifeguard on weekends."

"That reminds me. Did you hear about Bret?" Evan shoots us a sideways glance.

There's a chorus of no's as we shake our heads.

"He was sneaking back from a late-night swim last night, and saw a girl running out of the woods in nothing but her underwear." A full-blown grin overtakes his face. "She was too far away to see who it was, but she was blonde."

The edginess I've been experiencing all day multiplies tenfold. I keep my face down toward the ground so that I won't risk any eye contact with anyone around me.

Bret saw me. He must have been in the shadows because I saw no sign of anyone when I made that run. What if he recognized me?

"What do you think she was doing?" Brad asks Evan.

"Maybe it was a dare."

"I wonder who'll get the next one?" Jace says.

That's enough to grab my attention and have me looking up. "Do a lot of people get them?"

“There’s only a few given throughout the term, and you only get it once,” Lacy explains.

My heart stutters in my chest at the news, and I go still. “Once?”

She nods. “One dare per person. That’s all you get.”

One dare.

One?

How many have I had now?

Thoughts spinning in my head, I lose my grip on the phone in my hand. As it slips from my fingers, I numbly watch it bounce across the grass. Breaking away from the others, I keep my attention pinned on it. The second it stops, I crouch and scoop it up.

Why have I been receiving more dares?

The question repeats on a loop, and it takes me a second to realize I’m still kneeling on the grass. My eyes focus on a pair of sneakers in front of me, and as I slowly raise my head, everything inside me turns cold.

Eli.

Those dark green eyes bore straight into mine, holding me hostage, and for one awful second, my heart stops beating.

CHAPTER 50

ELI

I look down at the blonde on her knees in front of me and thank the universe I'm wearing dark jeans. If I'd still been in my sweats, there's no way I could hide the way my dick is pushing against the front of my pants at the thought of her mouth so close to it. The fact she has such an immediate effect on my body sends a surge of anger through me, and by the time her head lifts and her gaze clashes with mine, I'm burning with fury.

Her lips part, eyes widening, and I wonder what she sees on my face, in my eyes. Whatever it is drains the color from her cheeks, stills the breath in her lungs, and she scrambles backward until she tumbles onto her ass, hands planted behind her. The position spreads her legs, presses her breasts against her shirt, and I can't stop the smirk which tips up my lips.

"I appreciate the offer, Princess, but I'd need to see a recent clean bill of health before I'd put any part of my body near yours. Fuck knows what I might catch from a dirty skank like you. I hope Miles bought some disinfectant for his dick. Don't want it rotting off. That'd be embarrassing for the swim team."

There's a collective intake of breath from her friends, and embarrassment turns her face red. I let my gaze drift over her—her face, down her throat, pausing on her breasts for one long obvious moment, then lower to the thin slither of flesh I can see between the hem of her shirt and waistband of the sweats she's wearing. I wonder if she's wearing panties today. She's definitely wearing a bra. I reverse the direction of my gaze until I lock eyes with her again.

"You were in the woods again this morning. What did I tell you about that?" I don't bother to lower my voice.

Her tongue sweeps out across her lips, but she doesn't answer. The red in her cheeks deepens and she drops her gaze. My smirk broadens. "Seemed a strange place to leave your clothes when you have a perfectly good room to change in."

"You—" The word is a strangled moan, and it sends a flood of lust through me.

Fuck.

“Yeah, I found them. I recognized the sneakers. Why were you changing in the woods, Princess?”

“I ... wasn’t.”

I hike one eyebrow. “No?”

“I just ... I-I just—”

“Don’t give a fuck.” I toss a plastic bag, filled with her clothes, at her feet. “Stay out of my woods. Last warning.”

I turn away, meaning to join Kellan where he’s waiting at the edge of the football field, then swing back, just as Arabella is climbing to her feet.

“Oh, that reminds me.” I stride past her to where the cheer squad stands, gaping at our exchange. “This is yours.” I pull out a red thong from my pocket and toss it at Linda, who fumbles the catch.

The cheer squad’s eyes shift from Arabella to Linda. I shove my hands into the pockets of my hoodie, and head to where Kellan waits.

“That looked like fun.”

“She knows it’s a one dare and done situation.”

“Oh, that’s not good.”

I lift one shoulder in a half-shrug. “No one forced her to do anything. And she never asked if we had anything to do with the original dare.”

“Do you think she’ll pull out?” He snickers. “Pull out.”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll see. For now, let’s see how desperate she gets when she’s being ignored.”

He falls into step beside me, and we walk to the building where my art project awaits.

“Did you really fuck Linda?”

I slice a glance at him. “Fuck no. I don’t even know if that thong is hers. I just snagged it from the student laundromat on my way here. But it’ll cause shit between them, and that’s all that matters.”

We stop outside a room, and I pat my pockets until I locate the key to unlock it. Inside, I toss my bag onto the floor and cross the room to stand in front of the slab of marble.

“How long are you going to stare at it before starting work?” Kellan leans against the wall and watches me.

“It’s not something I can rush into. I need to get to know the stone.” I place my palm against it and move around, stroking over it, feeling the indents and veins running through it. “I have to learn where its flaws are and how best to use them to turn it into what I want.”

“You’re caressing it like it’s your lover.”

“Working with this stone will give me more satisfaction than any lover can. At least it stays quiet and does what I want without argument.”

He snorts a laugh. “If you had a lover who was that meek, you’d be bored within a week. You like a challenge, Eli. Just admit it.”

“We’re not talking in generalities right now, are we?” I face him, one hand still pressed against the marble.

“Of course not. I was sure you’d be done with these dares after a couple of days. But every one she does makes you hotter. Makes you want to push her that little bit further. That’s what last night was all about. Did you expect her to offer herself to us both that way?”

“She offered herself to me. You were an added bonus.”

“Thanks.” His voice is dry.

“You know what I mean. Until last night, she thought it was one person. She was getting wet and fingering herself because of her fantasy involving one stranger. Last night I gave her two.” My dick wakes up again, revisiting the scene in my head. “And she fucking enjoyed it.”

“I know. I have the nail marks in my arm where she dug in ... and not to make me stop.” He rolls up his sleeve to show me the small crescent marks on his forearm.

“Did you enjoy it?” I turn back to the marble.

“Did I enjoy having my mouth wrapped around a girl’s nipple while my best friend sucked on the other? The only thing that could have made it hotter was someone sucking my dick.”

“I’m not sucking your dick.”

He laughs. “But *she* might if you tell her to do it. She clearly gets off on being told what to do.”

“Who says I want your dick in her mouth?”

“Don’t you?”

I consider the question, building up the image of Arabella on her knees sucking off my friend. It does nothing for me ... until I give the scenario a little adjustment.

“Something’s got you smiling.” Kellan’s quiet words snap me out of the fantasy I’m building.

“I don’t want to fuck her.” The denial is more for me than my friend. “I told you, I want to fuck her over.”

“No reason you can’t do both.” He pushes away from the wall. “I’m heading down to the computer room to make a start on my own project. Catch up later?”

I nod, my mind already turning toward the project ahead of me and reach for my sketchbook. I need to make some modifications to the idea I have in mind for the stone, but I have time. There’s no rush.

I spend the rest of the day playing around with designs, until I hit on one that I think will work best with the stone. I’m still not going to start work on the sculpture for a week or so, but it’s satisfying to know I’ve got a plan in mind.

Standing, I rub my back and stretch, then grab my bag to open it and pull out the burner cell. It takes a second or two to power up, but the second it’s on, it buzzes with incoming texts.

Prey: I’m sorry. I can do better next time.

Prey: My clothes are missing. Did you take them? Is this a punishment?

Prey: WHO ARE YOU?

Prey: You didn’t set the first dare. There are no more dares after the first one. Who are you? Tell me!

Prey: Eli found my clothes. Now everyone is looking at me like I’m crazy.

Prey: Why are you doing this to me?

I shake my head at that one. I’m not doing anything to her that she doesn’t want. She knows how to stop the game. I could answer her. I could tell her it’s over. But I don’t do either. She’s not desperate enough yet.

Besides, it won’t be over until she’s broken.

CHAPTER 51

ARABELLA

“So, we’re going with the spooky cemetery theme in the ballroom for the Halloween party.” Lacy breaks into a huge smile as she addresses the students around the large table in the classroom. “Everyone has their tasks. Let’s make this an October to remember!”

“I guess we’ll be making paper bats for the next week,” Miles whispers in my ear.

I give him a smile but don’t reply.

It’s been two weeks since I had the last message from my darer. Fourteen days since Eli dumped my clothes beside me and threw Linda a red thong. A thong she’s been denying non-stop is hers. Lacy seems to have accepted her word, although Tina hasn’t. Brad, Evan, and Jace have gotten endless amounts of pleasure out of teasing her.

Luckily for me, they believed my excuse about hiding some clothes in the woods in case I got caught in the rain. I’d lied and told them it was something I’d done back in Michigan.

The thought of Eli pawing through my garments has my stomach twisting. I still can’t believe he found them. I’ve been avoiding him since he embarrassed me in front of the cheer squad.

Sitting a little straighter, I try to concentrate on Lacy’s words as she continues to talk. My nerves are frayed, and my hands are clenched into fists on my lap. I’ve been trying not to think about the guy in the woods, pushing the memories to the back of my head. The problem is they seep out into my dreams at night, leaving me empty and aching in the morning.

I hate that he’s left me in limbo.

I’m even convinced I heard his chuckle last week in the cafeteria. I’ve been drowning in questions and emotions.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How much we’re probably going to regret signing up for the decoration team,” I mumble.

“I kind of remember Lacy giving us no choice.”

“She’s strong in the ways of the Force.”

Miles chuckles at my Star Wars reference. “My roommate is going into town on Saturday. Do you want to come and hang out in my room after practice? We could watch a movie and cut out paper bats.”

The thought of anything that stops me from dwelling on the chaos in my head is a welcome offer. “Sure.”

“Okay, people. Don’t let me down.” Lacy claps her hands together. “We’ll have a meeting at the end of next week to see how you’re progressing.”

Everyone rises, seats scraping on the floor as they hurry to leave. Hanging back with Miles, we wait until the rush is over and a trickle of students are left.

Miles bumps his shoulder playfully into mine as we walk. “What’s wrong?”

I knock gently back into him. “It’s nothing.”

“Is it your mom?”

At the mention of Elena, I feel the void in my chest. “She texted me a few days ago. The message didn’t make any sense. I think she was drunk.”

Sometimes it feels like she’s trying to erase me from her life. It makes me wonder why she even bothered to come home in all the years she kept leaving. I don’t pull away when he holds my hand, used to the feeling of his fingers entwined loosely with mine.

“Are you going home for a visit?”

“No.”

Asking Eli to drive me isn’t an option. I don’t want to be stuck in a car with him again for four hours. He’d probably bury me alive somewhere before we even got halfway back to the Hamptons. I still don’t know what I’m going to do when we reach Thanksgiving break. Elena won’t come out this far to get me. Maybe I can book an Uber?

I think back to last year’s Thanksgiving. I’d spent it with Amanda and her parents. The warmth and love in their home had been so palpable it felt like being wrapped in a comforting blanket. My mother had been in L.A., banging one of her boyfriends. She turned up a few days later with streaky mascara and a souvenir keyring for me.

The holidays with Eli and our parents are going to be a new kind of torment.

“You know I’m here if you want to talk,” Miles says. “You can confide in me. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

A little of the tension eases in my shoulders. "I will. Just not right now."

"You already know all about Enrico." His cheeks flush red.

His boyfriend back home. The one he's madly in love with.

Smiling, I squeeze his hand. "When are you going to see him?"

"The weekend before the Halloween party."

"I'm happy for you."

When we reach the end of the hallway, Miles pulls away. "I promised Bret I'd meet up with him."

The restless energy that's fueled me the last few weeks floods my muscles. "Okay. Text me later."

He nods, walking in the direction of the library.

Before I even acknowledge what I'm doing, I have the phone out of my bag and in my hand. Gripping it tightly, I scroll through all the unanswered messages I've left.

Me: WHO ARE YOU?

Me: You didn't set the first dare. There are no more dares after the first one. Who are you? Tell me!

Me: Why are you doing this to me?

Me: Are you there?

Me: Why won't you respond?

Me: I don't know what you want from me.

Me: Was this all one big joke to you?

Me: Are you some kind of pervert that gets off luring girls to the woods and touching them?

Me: Did you have a good laugh with your friend afterward?

Me: Why me?

Me: Why did you pick me?

Me: Please talk to me.

Me: Do you want the phone and blindfold back?

I'm such a fucking idiot. I must have been crazy, feeling safe when I thought they were part of the school dares. There's a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I'm so fucking naive.

But you liked it. A small voice reminds me. *You miss the rush, and you want more.*

CHAPTER 52

ELI

I step back from the marble and press a hand to my back. I've been working on it for seven hours, knocking off portions of stone I don't need, ready to shape it into the piece I can see in my head.

I'm covered in dust, dripping in sweat, and my arms ache more than they would if I'd spent hours lifting weights. But it's a good pain, one I embrace because it's born of hard work and a desire to bring my vision to life.

Reaching for the bottle of water I left on the little table with my tools, I twist off the cap and drain half of the contents. I need to clean up and get food. I've missed breakfast and lunch, and my stomach is making its dissatisfaction known.

I toss the bottle into the trash can near the door and pick up my cell. There are six messages from Kellan and two missed calls, so I tap on his number and wait for him to pick up.

"There you are. I thought that giant stone might have fallen and crushed you."

"Yet you didn't come and check." I drag a hand through my hair, dislodging marble dust which plumes up like smoke around my face.

"I did. I peered through the window, but you were so engrossed in smashing the shit out of the stone, I didn't disturb you. I bet you didn't even open the door and find the sandwich I left for you."

My stomach grumbles at the mention of food. "You're right. I didn't." I wedge the cell between my shoulder and ear and listen to him while I clear away my tools.

"One day, Eli, you're gonna starve to death because I'm not there to remind you to eat."

"You're like the wife I didn't want."

"*That* explains the lack of sex."

"That and the fact you have a dick." I take one last look around the room, then step out and lock the door behind me. "I'm on my way back to our room now. Where are you?"

"Football field, watching the jocks get sweaty."

"Sounds riveting."

“Has its perks. I can always come and scrub your back for you.”

“I’m good, thanks. You could get food, though, and I’ll be there soon.”

“Done deal!”

I cut the call, and head out of the building. There’s a cluster of girls just ahead of me, giggling and whispering to each other, and as I pass them, one steps into my path.

“Eli, right?”

I walk around her without responding. She catches my sleeve and trots alongside me.

“The Halloween party was announced this morning.” She pauses as though I’m supposed to reply to her. I don’t, and after a second, she carries on talking. “I wanted to know if you have a date. If you haven’t, and you’re interested, I’d really like to ... you know ... go with you?”

I stop and swing to face her. My gaze sweeps over her from head to toe and back again. She’s pretty enough. Short red hair, curvy, freckles coating her cheeks and nose. “You want me to take you to the Halloween party?”

She nods, lips curving up into a smile, a hint of pink coating her cheeks.

“Why?”

Her smile falters. “What?”

“Why? In all the years we’ve been in this school together, you’ve never spoken to me. So ... why?”

“Because ...” Her tongue sweeps across her lips. Interesting. It doesn’t give me the same kick as when Arabella does it. “Because I like you?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

She presses her lips together, then nods. “I like you.” Her lashes drop. “I’ve always liked you.”

I snort. “Sure. Always, as in before I became the black sheep of the school, or always as in *after* when I became a little more dangerous?”

The pink in her cheeks fires up into a deep red.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I step closer, anger simmering beneath the surface of my skin. I know what she really wants, and it isn’t Eli Travers. “Did you want to fuck the Monster of Churchill Bradley? Do you want to claim you survived a night with me? Do you want to show all your girlfriends the marks I leave on your body? The handprints, the *bites*?”

I take another step until I’m crowding into her space. To her credit, she doesn’t back away, and her breasts press against my chest. My dick doesn’t

react at all. I lift a hand and twirl a lock of her hair around one finger.
“What’s your name?”

“Carmel.”

“Well, *Carmel*, I like the color red, so that’s one thing in your favor.”

Her smile returns.

“And blood would look so pretty against your skin, don’t you think?”

Her smile drops away.

“I could make you bleed and then lick it off while you suck my dick.
What do you say?”

“That’s ... No. That’s disgusting.”

I tilt my head. “Is it? I bet your pussy is wet just thinking about being naked in my bed, while I run a knife across your stomach. I’d cut off your panties, maybe fuck you with the handle. Give you a *real* story to tell your friends the day after. Would you like that ... *Carmel*?”

She stumbles backward, eyes wide, face pale. “You really *are* a monster, Eli Travers. It’s no wonder no one wants to be near you!”

Aggression boils through my veins at the accusation and my smile is a baring of teeth. “Run away, little girl. Before this *monster* decides he’s hungry.” I spin away and continue along the path toward the dorm building.

When I reach the room I share with Kellan, I strip off, shower, and change into fresh jeans, a t-shirt, and my favorite Nine Inch Nails hoodie.

When I arrive at the cafeteria, Kellan is at our usual table, with food and coffee waiting for me. As I make my way toward him, my foot touches something. I glance down. A bag is in my path. I could walk around it. I could step over it. It’s not that big. I don’t do either.

My veins are still full of anger after the confrontation with Carmel and I need an outlet. My gaze moves from the bag to the table, to the girl staring at me out of wary blue eyes.

I lean down and pick up the bag, straighten, and dump it on Arabella’s plate.

“Keep your shit out of my way.”

I don’t wait for a response and keep moving toward Kellan and food.

CHAPTER 53

ARABELLA

I prod at the slice of lasagna on my plate, wondering how much longer Miles is going to be. He texted me to let me know that he was still helping Bret, and we planned to meet up for lunch. So far, I've been here at the table alone for ten minutes, and it's starting to feel like he's going to be a no-show. Miles said it was something to do with an art project ...

Lunch trays clatter down around me, snapping me out of my daydream.

"You don't mind us joining you, do you, Bella?" Evan grins, dropping into the seat on my right.

Jace takes the seat to my left. "You kind of look lonely all by yourself."

Glancing around, I don't see any sign of the others. "I thought you were with Brad and Lacy."

Evan picks up his fork and scoops up a chunk of pasta off his plate. "Brad arranged a picnic for just the two of them. We weren't invited."

"Where's Miles?" Jace asks before taking a sip of juice from his glass.

"He's helping Bret with something." I flick my attention to his face. "I'm sorry if I upset you by going out with Miles."

The corners of his lips curve up as he places his hand over his heart. "It was a small hit to my pride, but we can still be friends, though, right?"

Smiling back, I return my gaze to my plate. "I'd like that."

"What are you going as for the Halloween party?"

I shrug. "I don't know yet."

"You could always ask Lacy if you need to borrow a costume," Evan suggests around a mouthful of food. "She has like a million of them."

Jace chuckles. "She can never make up her mind what she wants to be, so ends up with a ton of them."

"What are you two going to be?" I pop another forkful of lasagna into my mouth and chew.

"We haven't decided yet, but I think I'd look good in a pair of fangs."

My bag thuds down on the table in front of me, landing on the plate of food and splattering the creamy, white sauce all over my top.

"Keep your shit out of my way," Eli snarls, but doesn't stop walking.

People glance my way, whispers erupting throughout the cafeteria. I lower my head, humiliation coursing through me, I snatch up a paper napkin and dab at the mess that's on my chest.

Jace lifts my bag. There's a chunk of lasagna stuck to the bottom. "Shit, Arabella. Are you okay?"

"No." The word comes out unevenly.

Evan uses his fork to dislodge the messy lump, letting it plop back onto my plate. "That's inedible now."

"I'm not hungry anymore." I take the bag from Jace and grab a bunch of napkins. Dipping it into my glass of water, I rub it across the stain on the bottom, but it only makes it worse.

Jace hands me another napkin. "I think it's ruined."

I blink rapidly and try to stop the tears that threaten to fall. "That bag was a birthday present from my best friend."

"Maybe you could get it dry-cleaned." Evan takes another bite of pasta.

I abandon my dabbing and push my chair back. "I think I'm done with lunch."

Not waiting for either of them to reply, I aim for the doors and don't stop until I'm outside in the fresh air.

Eli Travers can burn for all I care.

He's nothing but a spoiled, hateful brat.

I hate him.

"Bella, wait up."

Swinging around at Jace's call, I tighten my grip on the bag. "What?"

His expression darkens. "Do you want to get back at Eli for what he did?"

I throw a glance back at the cafeteria and shift restlessly on the spot. "What do you mean?"

"I'll show you."

He doesn't say another word as I follow him. By the time we hit the empty hallway where all the seniors' lockers are, I'm starting to wonder if whatever he's planning is a good idea.

He opens his own, reaches inside and pulls something out. "Here."

I gape down at the spray can he shoves into my hand. "Where did you get this?"

"Art room."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

He nudges his chin to our left. "Spray on his locker."

My mouth goes dry. "You want me to graffiti it?"

Grabbing my hand, he tugs me along the hallway until we reach Eli's locker and maneuvers me into position in front of it. "We need to be quick."

I'm still clutching the can, uncertainty holding me still. Jace moves up behind me until I can feel the warmth of his front pressing into my back.

"What are you waiting for?" He grips my waist with one hand, fingers digging into my side. "Come on, Bella. Do it before a teacher walks by. They won't be in the cafeteria for long."

Something dark and dangerous flows through me. A tiny slither of rebellion, but it doesn't feel the same as when I do the dares. I'm not sure I like it.

"This doesn't feel like a good idea."

Jace shifts his hips against my ass. "Eli embarrassed you in front of everyone in the cafeteria. Are you going to let him get away with that?"

Heat burns through my cheeks. "But if anyone finds out—"

His fingers tighten on my hip. "No one will find out. I'll take the can back to the art room when we're done."

When I don't reply, he wraps his fingers around mine, and he brings my arm up. He presses down on the can's nozzle, and a stream of paint sprays out. The shape of a penis takes form in a white outline on the surface of the metal.

His body shakes with laughter behind me. "That will teach Travers."

The second he steps back, I scramble to the left and out of the intimate embrace. "You shouldn't have done that."

Glancing up and down the hallway, he herds me toward the exit. "He's getting exactly what he deserves."

"I want him to stop picking on me." I play with the strings on the front of my hoodie, anxiety rising. "This will make him worse."

"It's just payback."

CHAPTER 54

ELI

"I think you struck a nerve." Kellan bumps me with his shoulder. We both stare at the badly drawn penis covering the front of my locker.

"It's bold, I'll say that much." I pull out my cell and place a call to on-site maintenance so they can clean it off. Once I'm done, I turn to regard the misshapen dick again. "The proportions are off. I can't decide whether she can't fucking draw or has never seen a dick in her life."

"That's your takeaway from someone spray painting a dick on your locker?" Kellan snicker. "Only you would judge their artistic talent."

There are shocked gasps and laughter from the students milling around us as they move along the hallway to their own lockers. I ignore them.

"If you're trying to send a message, at least put some effort into it. Otherwise, what's the point? It's just fucking lazy."

A familiar laugh sounds behind me, and I turn, one hand flashing out to grip the arm of the girl walking past me. Lacy screeches, and twists to face me. Whatever vitriol she is going to spew dies on her lips when she realizes who's holding onto her.

"Eli!"

"Tell your roommate I received her message. Loud and clear."

"M-message?" Her eyes dart past me to where Kellan leans against the lockers, watching. "What message?"

"The one I'm more than happy to respond to." I jerk my chin toward the spray-painted locker.

Lacy's eyes widen when she sees the painted dick. "I don't think ... Arabella wouldn't do that!"

"We both know that's a lie." My voice is soft. "But message received. She's not scared of me." I smile, and Lacy tries to take a step backward. "But she will be." I release the cheerleader who doesn't hang around. She spins and sprints down the hallway.

Kellan is doubled over, laughing hard when I turn to face him. "That ... was ... priceless," he gasps between laughs. "Her face ... oh my god ... I can't ... can't breathe!"

“You’re so easily entertained.” I look at my locker again. She must have sprayed it after dinner yesterday when I dumped her bag on the table. “What’s our first class today?”

“Math.”

I nod and pull out the burner cell from my bag. Powering it up, it immediately starts buzzing with incoming texts. I haven’t checked it for two weeks. I guess the same can’t be said for Arabella.

I prop my back against my locker and scroll through them. Numerous demands to know who I am. A couple accusing me of not being the person who initially dared her. I laugh at that.

No shit, Sherlock.

The final one is dated less than a week ago, asking if she should return the blindfold and cell.

Toying with my lip ring, I start typing.

Me: Nice job on the dick pic you sent to Eli Travers, but if you’re that hungry for attention, all you had to do was say so. Green or red, Kitten? Do you dare to play again?

I power the cell off and shove it back in my bag.

What are you doing? The question revolves on a loop inside my head as I follow Kellan to math. *You decided two weeks ago that you were done, so why the fuck have you reopened contact?*

The answer is simple. By spray painting a dick on my locker, she’s showing a bravery I didn’t think she possessed, and it reminds me that my plan was to break her.

I can’t break her if I don’t play with her.

Something dark unfurls inside of me. She wanted my attention, well now she has it.

I ignore the voice that whispers how she has no idea I’m the one she’s been fucking around with in the dark. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that she’s fired a shot of her own. I’d be foolish not to shoot back.

We’re the final two students to enter the room when we finally arrive at math. Mr. Drake points at our seats but doesn’t say anything, and we slip between the desks. My elbow accidentally connects with Arabella’s nose on the way past, and she hisses from the pain of it. I could apologize. But I don’t. It suits me for everyone to believe I did it on purpose. I don’t even look at her and drop onto my seat, stretching my legs out in front of me.

Drake drones on about trigonometry, and I doodle in my sketchbook while he recaps everything we should have learned over the past two years. I take in information better if I can keep my hands busy, so doodling has become a technique to help me focus over the years. Not that it'll help me with math. It doesn't matter what I do. I won't be able to focus on it. And I fucking hate math. Which is just as well because it hates me right back.

When Drake finally stops talking and issues worksheets, I flip my sketchbook closed, tuck it back into my bag and attempt to focus on the work in front of me.

The numbers swirl, becoming nonsense, and I pinch the bridge of my nose between two fingers and close my eyes. One breath, two, a third, and then I open them. The figures are back in the positions they're meant to be in, but they still make very little sense to me.

It doesn't matter though, I'll still ace the class. My dad pays the school too much to have me fail. The thought leaves a trace of bitterness behind. I hate the fact that I'm not held up to the same standard as the other students. That the teachers don't even expect me to try.

I drum my fingers on the desk. Kellan will go over the math problems with me later when no one is around. It's a system we've developed over the years, back when we discovered I had problems with numbers.

When the bell rings to announce the end of the class, I shove the worksheet into my bag and stand. Art is next, and I'm aware that the entire class is supposed to be helping design murals and artwork for the Halloween party. I also know I won't be asked to take part. I'll be left to focus on my own things.

Before my life was upturned, every time I was passed over for another more popular kid, it had hurt, stung, twisted like a knife in the gut. Now? Now I don't give a flying fuck. I like who I am, and anyone who doesn't isn't worth my time or attention.

I part company with Kellan at the end of the hallway, and take a slow stroll to the art room, checking my burner cell for messages as I go. There's no reply yet, and I'm tempted to send another text, but I want to see what she does with what I've already said first.

CHAPTER 55

ARABELLA

Unknown number: Nice job on the dick pic you sent to Eli Travers, but if you're that hungry for attention, all you had to do was say so. Green or red, Kitten? Do you dare to play again?

Lips pressed together, I squash the tiny explosion of relief at the text. He spent two weeks ignoring me and pretending I didn't exist. I should be angry, not happy he's reached out. I jab the buttons of my phone.

Me: You left me hanging. Why should I play?

A full five minutes pass and he doesn't reply. Disappointment settles over me. The silence brings the same old dejection that's been part of me for as long as I can remember.

I put the phone back in my bag, and head to the next class, refusing to let myself dwell on it. Instead, I worry about what Eli might do when he sees his locker.

Hopefully, Jace is right. He won't work out it was us. There are a ton of other students at the school who hate him.

The sound of buzzing distracts me from the book I'm reading. I open my bag and check the phone.

Unknown number: You disobeyed me more than once, and that was your punishment. Maybe next time you'll listen more closely to my instructions. Green or red, Kitten?

I can't help but squirm in my seat at the word disobey. I've always prided myself on being a good, straight-A student. Mostly, I'd done it to try and get Elena's attention. When that didn't work, I settled for praise from my teachers. Burying my nose in books had also been a way to hide when my mother flew into drunken rages. The harsh, cruel words I've heard through the years try to leak from where I have them buried in my head. Unhappy disjointed memories join them, but I stop them before they become overwhelming.

My attention refocuses on the message.

Me: You've given me no reason to trust you.

Less than a minute after I hit send, I receive another text.

Unknown number: Yet that didn't matter when you thought I sent the original dare. What reason did I give you to trust me then? I bet you've been picturing me every time you've touched yourself for the last two weeks.

A rush of moisture pools between my legs. Tearing my gaze away from the screen, I chew my thumbnail and stare at the wall.

How the hell does he know that?

Another message pops up on the screen.

Unknown number: Do you still want to play? This is the last time I'll ask. Green or red?

The pressure to answer builds. I grip the phone in my hand, take a deep breath and then reply.

Me: Green.

Unknown number: Good girl. Meet me at the bench an hour after curfew. Put on the blindfold and wait. Let's find out how brave you really are.

I close the book in front of me, grab my bag and leave the table. There's no way I'm going to concentrate on anything else now.

I make my way back to my room. The bathroom door is closed when I enter, and I can hear Lacy singing from inside over the sound of running water. I cross to my side of the room, dig out some black sweats and a matching t-shirt, then find the fanny pack at the bottom of the drawer. The mini stun-gun Miles bought me catches my eye and my hand hovers over it. Before I can change my mind, I snatch it up and stuff it in my pocket.

My unknown darer may have coaxed me back into the woods, but I'm not going unarmed this time. Anxiousness prickles my skin. I might be curious, but I'm also angry. A tiny part of me is tempted to leave him out there all alone.

He definitely won't message me again if I do that. Is that really what I want?

I fold the clothes and hide them under my pillow. I'll go and see what he has to say, but that doesn't mean I have to agree to anything.

But what if I want to agree? A traitorous voice whispers in my head.

The heat of their mouths is still on my breasts like an invisible brand. I can't deny that since that night, I've felt different. He's awakened something within me. Something that hadn't been there before.

Lust?

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CHAPTER 56

ELI

“I thought you were done with her?” Kellan says after I tell him we’re heading into the woods to meet Arabella again.

“I was.”

“And then she spray-painted a dick on your locker.” He chuckles. “I don’t think that was her way of saying she wanted to play more games, Eli.”

“And yet she does.” I tap the cell phone against my lips.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Tonight, we set some rules for the game.” I crouch down and drag her diary out from beneath my bed.

“Looking for inspiration?” He comes to sit beside me, and we both look down at the pages. “What about that? That sounds fucking hot.” He points to a paragraph.

“I’m not sucking your dick while she watches.” I flip the page.

“I’ll suck *your* dick.” He turns the page back. “Look at how horny she is at the idea of watching two guys going at it.”

“Not in this lifetime.”

Kellan sighs. “You’re no fun, Eli. A mouth is a mouth. They all feel the same, no matter who it’s attached to.”

“And yet my answer is still no.” I scan the pages looking for something to jump out at me.

“She really didn’t get the whole stranger danger talk, did she?” Kellan taps the scribbled words spilling across the page. “She *really* likes the idea of being watched by an unknown someone.”

“And being praised.” I stroke my fingers over the sentence at the bottom of the page.

All I want is someone to tell me I’m good, that I’m doing everything right. Is that too much to ask?

The words are smudged. Something had wet the page and smeared the ink not long after she wrote them. I wonder what was going through her mind at the time of writing. Not that it matters to me. It’s simply something I can use.

“It’s almost time. Are you ready to go?” Kellan’s voice drags me out of my thoughts. “What time is it?”

“Ten-fifteen. She won’t leave the dorm until after curfew. We have fifteen minutes to get there and prepare.”

It’s a good thing we’re quiet in our approach because Arabella is already at the bench when we arrive. She’s sitting straight, shoulders back, head up, blindfold in place and her hands tucked between her thighs. I share a look with Kellan, and we pull our ski masks over our heads before we reach her.

Her head swings in our direction when I step on leaves, which crunch under my foot.

“It’s us,” I say before she can ask, deepening and lowering my tone so she doesn’t recognize me.

“Us? Two of you?” Her soft voice skitters over my skin.

“Is that a problem?”

“No.” There’s no hesitation in her response.

I move closer and reach out to stroke my gloved finger over her lips. They part as soon as I touch her.

“Why are you here, Kitten?”

“Because you told me to be here.”

I tut and tap her bottom lip. “Wrong answer. That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

Her tongue comes out and touches the leather covering my finger. “I want to play again.”

“Why? You could play with your boyfriend? *Miles*, isn’t it?”

“It’s not the same.” She doesn’t deny he’s her boyfriend, and anger unfurls in my stomach.

“I’m not sure you’re worth it. You can’t even follow simple instructions.”

“I’ll do better. I swear. But ... you can’t make me do things that will get me into trouble at school.” The words come out in a rush.

“You’re out in the woods after curfew. That will get you into trouble if you’re caught.”

“That’s not what I mean. Nothing ... extreme.”

“Not much of a dare if there’s no risk, Kitten.” I let my finger drop from her lips and take a step back. “I think this is where we say goodbye.”

“No! Wait.” She lurches up off the bench and throws her arm out.

Kellan dances back a step, barely avoiding being hit in the chest.

“Are you still here?”

I debate whether to answer or not.

“I’ll do dares for you ... here or anywhere else ... just between us. I’ll sneak out to meet you. I’ll play your games. I’ll do anything you say as long as it doesn’t interfere with my schoolwork. I can’t be thrown out!”

“That’s a dangerous thing to say, Kitten. *Anything* I say? Without limits?” The possibilities are endless, I should be euphoric at the idea, yet I’m not. I don’t like the desperation in her voice. “Why would you want that?”

She doesn’t reply, her teeth biting into her bottom lip.

“I want an answer. If you can’t give me a reason, then we’re done.”

“Because having you tell me what to do makes me feel good,” she whispers.

My spine snaps taut, and my fingers clench into fists at my sides. Kellan frowns at me.

“Go back to your room, Kitten.” I step backward, then turn to the path which would lead me to the tomb.

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” she calls out. “Wait? Are you there?”

I don’t answer her. Kellan looks at me. I shake my head and keep walking.

CHAPTER 57

ARABELLA

“Just the black?” Miles thumbs through the colored cardstock.

I glance up from the pile I’m sorting through. “I don’t think Lacy is visualizing pink bats decorating her spooky theme.”

“Her loss.” He pulls some of the sheets out to add to our collection.

The art room is empty. Not surprising for a Saturday afternoon. The whole week had dragged by with no response from my darer since Monday. He left me alone on the bench, and after the way he ghosted me again ... I guess I have his answer.

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I blink fast as my eyes blur with moisture.

I shouldn’t keep checking the phone every five minutes. I’m such a fucking idiot. What did I expect? I’ve humiliated myself all over again. I don’t know why I keep doing it.

If that wasn’t enough, I found a dead rabbit in my locker on Wednesday. The poor little thing with its snapped neck left me sick to my stomach. None of the teachers said anything, but I noticed Eli wasn’t in any classes that afternoon.

Brad told me at lunch that the faculty suspects Eli is the culprit, and they put him on temporary confinement. I’m not sad that he was restricted to his room to do classes over his computer for the rest of the week. When he needs to leave his room, a security guard accompanies him.

How long is that going to last? He’ll be back to picking on me soon enough.

The thought feeds my anxiety until my hands are shaking, and I almost drop the pieces of cardstock I’m holding.

“I think we have enough.”

Miles’ voice snaps me from my thoughts.

I hug the sheets to my chest. “I have scissors and some marker pens, so we can draw out a stencil.”

“Okay, let’s head to my room. We won’t have any interruptions there.”

I hold the door open for him, my shoulder aching so much I groan.

Miles cast’s a worried look in my direction. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Lacy had me doing cartwheels, spins, and handstands. All while I had to smile, and remember a bunch of chants.” I pull a face.

“I thought you were fit with all that running.”

“It doesn’t make me a gymnast.”

We exit the building. The rain from earlier has eased, but wet drops are still coming down, so we hunch our shoulders to protect what we’re carrying, and dart toward the dorm building.

Miles shakes his head as we run inside, sprinkling water everywhere. “Do you want to stop by your room and dry off?”

“I’m not that wet, and my hoodie will dry.”

His room is on the floor below mine with the rest of the senior boys. We pass other students hanging out in the communal seating areas while others huddle around study tables. A group of people are watching a movie in one of the shared living rooms.

Balancing the cardstock he’s holding in one arm, Miles fumbles for his key. Somehow, he manages to get his door open without dropping everything on the floor and stands back to let me enter first, then kicks the door closed behind us.

“We can dump it here.” He drops the sheets, letting them fall to the floor in a heap in the corner of the room.

I add mine to the pile and then turn to inspect his room curiously.

“Bret’s your roommate?” There are photographs of the other swimmer decorating the wall above one of the beds.

“Yeah.” Kicking off his shoes, Miles sprawls out on his own bed. “Do you like superhero movies? We can watch something while we work.”

I lower my bag to the floor and squash the urge to check the phone, taking off my sneakers instead. “Who doesn’t?”

“DC or Marvel?”

“Oh, no! I don’t align myself with sides. I’m firmly in the middle.”

Miles laughs, reaching for the sleek gray laptop on his nightstand. “You know that’s the easy way out, right?”

I shrug. “I like characters in both universes. Why should I choose when I can enjoy both?”

“You present a compelling argument.”

“So, what do you prefer? DC or Marvel?”

Scooting over on the mattress, he makes room for me to join him. “No one can say no to Thor. Have you seen the size of his ... hammer?”

I shake my head, laughing, while I unzip my damp hoodie and take it off.
“Are those scars?” he asks as I drape my top over the chair beside his desk.

My gaze is drawn to the skin just above my right wrist. “Burn marks.”

Miles sits up, moving a little closer. “How did you get them?”

I run a fingertip over one of the blemishes. “I was six, and my mom brought one of her boyfriends home for the weekend. He decided to use me as an ashtray when he was drunk.”

A knock on the door stops Miles from answering.

“Hey, Miles. You in there?” Evan’s voice calls out.

We both freeze.

“Moan,” Miles mouths at me.

“What?”

“Moan!”

I let out a long-drawn-out groan like a porn star.

“You like that, baby.” His voice is rough, but his eyes are full of mischief.

Trying not to giggle, I cry out. “Ahhh, Miles. Right there. *Right there!*”

“Ah, shit, man,” Evan says. “I didn’t know you were busy. I’ll talk to you later.”

Neither of us speak until we’re sure he’s gone.

“Do you think he believed it?”

Miles breaks into a grin. “If anyone doubted we were dating, they won’t after this.”

CHAPTER 58

ELI

“Eli,” Principal Warren’s voice is soft. “I know you’ve had some issues with your father’s new marriage. I’m sure it’s been hard to adjust to having a sister after all this time of being an only child.”

“Stepsister. Completely different parents. Her mother marrying my dad does not make her related to me.”

“Her mom marrying your dad isn’t Arabella’s fault, Eli.”

“Did I say it was?” I lift my gaze to meet his.

“Then why the rabbit?”

I don’t lower my eyes. “Why the fuck not?”

“Language, Eli.”

“What are you going to do? Throw me out?” I shove to my feet. “Want me to go pack?”

“Sit down.” His voice doesn’t deviate from the calm, soothing tones. It grates on my nerves. “Of course, I’m not sending you away from school. But it’s been a long time since we last had to deal with dead animals, Eli. What triggered it?”

I throw my head back and stare up at the ceiling, but don’t respond.

The principal sighs. “If you’re not willing to talk about it, then I have no choice but to discipline you. You can work from your dorm room for the rest of the week.”

My head snaps forward, and I scowl. “What about my art piece?”

“You can continue with that. I’ll arrange for security to accompany you to and from the room. Kellan can bring you food. I want you to stay out of class and the cafeteria until Monday.”

“And then what?”

“I hope it’ll give you time to calm down and realize that Arabella is not your enemy. The poor girl was very upset to find that dead animal in her locker.”

My lip curls. I hadn’t been there when she opened the locker, but I heard that she screamed loud enough to bring security running. I want to hear her scream for *me*.

“That’s all, unless you have something to tell me?”

“What would I want to tell you?” He wants me to admit to butchering the rabbit and breaking into Arabella’s locker. He’s going to have to live with disappointment.

He stares at me for a second or two longer and then nods. “Alright then. Security is waiting outside to take you back to your room. Be at class Monday morning.”

I tap two fingers against the side of my head in a mock salute and leave his office.

Being cooped up almost twenty-four-seven in my room isn’t a punishment, not in the way the principal thinks anyway. I *like* being alone, and when the school day ends Kellan is there to entertain me with stories of what happened during classes or breaks. But even I have my limits and by the time Saturday rolls around, I’m starting to go stir-crazy, so I request a pass so I can work on my art project for the day. The principal agrees and sends one of the security guards to escort me.

I’m waiting for him when he taps on my door, and I slip out and into the hallway. The guard outside smiles. I recognize him. He’s one of the longest-serving staff members here. I’ve known him since I was twelve.

“One day you’re going to learn to control your temper, Eli.” His voice is wry. “There’s only so many times the school is going to give you a free pass.”

I shrug. “Maybe. But clearly not any time soon.”

He chuckles and we head toward the stairwell. Evan Ridley is coming in the opposite direction, and he stops outside Miles Cavanagh’s door. I slow my pace and reach the door just as there’s a throaty female moan from inside. Evan turns bright red and starts laughing. I roll my eyes, and then a voice cries out. One I recognize.

“Ahhh, Miles. Right there. *Right there!*”

My steps falter.

What the fuck?

It takes every ounce of self-control I own not to kick down the door and demand to know what the fuck she’s doing. Those moans belong to me. *Not* that fucking assclown. I’ve half-turned before I realize and check myself.

“Eli?” The security guard saying my name brings me under control and I pick up speed and stalk away from the room. From her moans. From Arabella having sex with Miles Fucking Cavanagh.

“Is everything okay?”

I glance at the security guard keeping pace beside me. “Sure.”

“Was the girl in that room someone you like?”

I laugh. “Fuck no. It’s my—” My teeth snap together. Like fuck am I going to explain who she is. “No. If I never see the fucking bitch again it’d be too soon.”

Why are you lying? Just fucking admit that the moan you heard made your dick hard.

I shake my head, clearing the image of her spread out, legs wide, fingers dancing on her clit as she plays for me on the bed, out of my head. But I can’t shake the need burning in my veins, or the way my blood heats up at the thought of making her moan that way for me.

By the time we reach the room which houses my art project, I’m making plans. I’ve been easy with her so far. Her reactions have been that of someone who wasn’t sure about their body, but what I’ve just heard tells a different story. She’s not the hesitant little virgin she pretends to be, and I was a fool for letting her behavior make me start to believe otherwise.

My first instincts were correct. I have to remember who her mother is, that she is no different. The pair of them are only out for what they can get. That’s why she’s fucking Miles. His family comes from money, and I’ve already seen the gift bags he’s handed to her.

I stare at the marble in front of me, but I’m not seeing it. I see a blonde-haired, blue-eyed distraction, with a cupid’s bow mouth. Growling under my breath, I swing my bag off my shoulder and dig through it until I find the cell phone.

Me: How many times did you come? Did he use his mouth? His fingers? His dick? Tell me what he did to you. What did he have to give you for you to give up your pussy to him?

I hit send before I can change my mind and then spend the next god knows how fucking long berating myself for even giving a fuck about what she’s doing with someone else.

CHAPTER 59

ARABELLA

“Do you want to go down to the cafeteria, or shall I grab some sandwiches and bring them back up?”

I shift my head on the pillow beside him. “Can we eat here?”

“What do you want in your sandwich?”

“Cheese, if they have it.”

Sitting up, he taps pause on the laptop. “And if they don’t?”

I stretch. “Roast beef or turkey.”

“I won’t be long, and then we can finish our epic movie marathon.” He bounces off the bed.

Once he’s left, I look at the pile of black cardstock bats we spent the last few hours making. Not enough to fill the ballroom yet, but it’s a good start. Sliding off the bed, I check my main phone. There are two texts waiting for me. One from Amanda about her latest date with her boyfriend and another from Elena asking me to let her know if either Eli or I plan to come home.

Why does she think I’m talking to him? Is she that much in a dream world that she thinks we’ll magically get along after a couple of weeks at school together?

Shaking my head in disgust, I put my phone away and reach for the other one.

Unknown number: How many times did you come? Did he use his mouth? His fingers? His dick? Tell me what he did to you? What did he have to give you for you to give up your pussy to him?

Lips parting, I reread the message.

He’s still spying on me. Why?

I clutch the phone and sit on the edge of the bed to reply.

Me: Why should I tell you anything? Are you jealous?

He answers in less than a minute.

Unknown number: I thought you wanted to play.

Me: I do, but you keep ghosting me, so I thought it was over.

Unknown number: Tell me what he did to you, and maybe the games can begin again.

Me: How do I know you won’t vanish again?

Unknown: You're just going to have to trust me, Kitten.

I hesitate, my fingers hovering over the buttons.

What the hell do I type? What would sound right for the noises he must have heard through Miles' door? Is he a student on this floor? Is this a clue to his identity? Is he one of the senior boys?

Using my imagination, I give him what he wants.

Me: He used his mouth. Licked me between my legs. Kissed my breasts.

Unknown number: That's all?

Me: Yes.

Unknown number: You didn't ride his dick?

Heat burns my cheeks at the image his words invoke.

Me: We've only gone as far as second base.

Unknown number: How many times?

I frown.

Me: How many times what?

Unknown number: Don't be bashful, Kitten. How did you put it? He licked you between your legs. How. Many. Times?

I tap a random number.

Me: 5.

Unknown number: Bench. Now.

I shoot a nervous glance toward the door.

Me: But I'm about to have dinner.

Unknown: Don't give a fuck. Now or we're done. For good.

Is it my imagination or is he jealous? A jolt of excitement sweeps through me .

Me: I'm leaving now.

As I hurry out of Miles' room, I fumble for my other phone, and text Miles.

Me: I have something to do, so keep my sandwich safe. I'll be back.

Miles: Is everything okay?

Me: Yes. I promise we'll finish the movie.

Miles: I'll be waiting with the two pieces of chocolate cake I have :P

I rush up to my room, find the blindfold and stuff it into my pocket, then race back out and along the hallway. I don't slow down until I'm outside.

Have I made him angry? Maybe I should be scared?

Okay, maybe I am, I admit to myself. It's not past curfew, and this is the first time he's asked to meet when we could easily get caught.

Fingers curled into fists, I keep up a brisk pace toward the trees. I wanted a reaction from him, and now I have one. I'm just not sure if I should be frightened or pleased.

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CHAPTER 60

ELI

“Where are you going?” Kellan’s voice stops me as I reach for the handle.

“A run.”

“You’re on lockdown.”

“Don’t give a fuck.” The words come out as a snarl.

Fucking five times. Is that five times he’s buried his face between her thighs or five times he’s made her come?

I shy away from answering the question of *why* I’m so angry about it. I’ve been simmering at a slow burn since hearing her moans. But when she finally answered my texts, that simmer fired up and spilled over.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I just need some air.” I pull open the door and stick my head out to check up and down the hallway. Most people should be in the cafeteria, so it should be easy for me to head upstairs to the tunnel entrance without being caught. “Text me if anyone comes looking for me.”

I pull the hood up on my jacket and move at a rapid pace to the stairwell and go up to the next floor. The entrance to the tunnel is in a storage closet at the far end of the hallway, and I keep my head down just in case anyone comes out of a room.

Thankfully no one is around, and I slip into the closet without anyone catching me and I climb out at the other end a few minutes later. Pulling the ski mask out of my pocket, I put it on and set off through the trees.

She’s sitting on the bench when I get there, in a similar pose to the last time. Head up, shoulders back, hands tucked between her thighs. She’s wearing loose yoga pants and a pink hoodie. I watch where I’m placing my feet and reach her without her hearing me.

“Stand up.” I bark the words and she jumps.

She scrambles to her feet. I hook my hand around her arm, and set off, pulling her along beside me.

“Where are we going?” She trips over a tree root and almost crashes to the ground. My grip tightens, hauling her upright. “Slow down!”

“No talking.” I growl the words in a low undertone as I lead her between the graves to the steps leading down to the tomb. I flatten my other hand on

the top of her head. "Duck."

She just misses knocking herself out on the low entrance and slips down the step into the tomb's interior. I push the door shut, then release her arm.

"Take three steps forward." That'll put her directly in front of Churchill's coffin.

"Can I take the blindfold off?"

"No."

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere we won't be disturbed." I move closer.

"Is your friend here?"

"No." I rest my hands on her shoulders and turn her, so her back is to the coffin. "Five times, you said. Was that just today?"

"I—"

"Did you mean he's eaten you out five times, or made you come five times? What's he done five times, Kitten?" I run my fingers down her arm and circle her wrist. Lifting her hand, I flatten it against her stomach. "Did he kiss you five times? Fuck you five times? No, wait, you said he didn't use his dick. His mouth, right? That's what you said." I lean close and press my lips to her ear. "He *licked* you between the legs with his tongue five times," I whisper and feel her shiver.

My hand covers hers, and I inch them both downwards toward the waistband of her pants.

"Green or red, Kitten?" Her breathing quickens at my question. "Do you want *me* to lick you ... *between the legs* ... five times?"

I run my tongue along her ear. Our fingers are touching the top of her pants.

"When he was between your legs, his tongue lapping at your pussy, who were you thinking about?"

I ease our hands beneath the elastic of her pants and down further until we're sliding over her panties. I curve her finger beneath mine, cupping her pussy.

"Did he feast on you the way we did at the bench? Did he make you desperate to come?"

My lips find the lobe of her ear. I take it between my teeth and give a sharp nip.

A small whimper escapes her, and I laugh softly. There's something dark swirling inside me, a hunger that needs feeding. *I* want her moans, her cries.

“Green or red?”

I flex my fingers, pressing her palm against her pussy. My thumb strokes along the edge of her panties and her stance shifts, legs parting. I move forward, sending her back step by step until her ass collides with the marble of the coffin.

“Please.” The word is a needy whine.

“Wrong answer.”

I start to withdraw my hand and she grabs my wrist. I let her stop me, allow her to guide my hand back down to her pussy, only she pushes it beneath her panties and my gloved fingers make contact with warm wetness.

Our groans are synchronized as my fingers slide deeper until I graze her clit. Her hips buck, fingernails biting into my wrist as I stroke her sensitive flesh. She’s soaking my glove, making it easy to slide my fingers over her clit and inside her. She stills, a gasp leaving her lips, and I wrap my free hand around her jaw and turn her face away from me, so I can bite along her throat. My fingers pump in and out of her, while my thumb strokes, circles, and flicks against her clit.

“Does Miles licking you feel like this, Kitten?”

She shakes her head, and I wonder if her eyes are open or closed.

“Ride my fingers like a good girl.”

She grinds against my hand, and I curl my fingers, pressing the heel of my palm against her clit.

“Do you want to come?”

Her nod is a jerky movement. I pull my fingers free and step back. “Too bad.”

“Wh-what?” Her voice is thick with lust and desire.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I peel off the gloves I’m wearing and toss them to the floor, moving back to the door.

“Question?” She sounds dazed.

“See, that’s the problem, Kitten. You don’t listen.” I step through the door and let it swing closed behind me, leaving her hungry, needy, on the edge. Just like *I’m* hungry, needy, and on the edge.

Once I’m a safe distance away, I pull out the burner cell.

Me: Keep yourself on the edge for twenty-four hours. If you are a good girl and don’t come, I’ll make you feel good

tomorrow night. But only if you can remember what I asked you today. Green or red, Kitten?

I fire off the text and head back toward the dorm building.

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CHAPTER 61

ARABELLA

The second I hear the phone buzz in my pocket, I remove the blindfold. A whine of confusion leaves my throat. My legs are shaking so bad I sink to the floor before I can collapse. I can still feel the tingly warmth that had spread through my pussy, but it's no longer intense without his touch. I press my thighs together, trying to alleviate the needy throbbing in my core. My panties are drenched, and it's as though his fingers are still inside me.

I slide my hand into my pocket, and I take out the phone.

Unknown number: Keep yourself on the edge for twenty-four hours. If you are a good girl and don't come, I'll make you feel good tomorrow night. But only if you can remember what I asked you today. Green or red, Kitten?

Free hand twitching with the need to finish what he started; it takes all my willpower not to touch myself.

If I'm good, he'll finish what he started.

Everything inside tightens with a need I barely understand. Hands still shaking, I text him my answer.

Me: Yes, green. I want to come.

So bad it hurts.

Raising my head, I take in my surroundings. It's gloomy, the walls made of stone. I don't recognize it, but it can't be far from the cemetery. I place my hand on the stone behind me and use it for support as I move to stand. Once I'm on my feet, I finally see what it is.

A coffin.

I step backward, and spin around, wildly searching for the exit. It takes me a second to spot the light filtering in through a gap. I dart toward it, hoping it's the door. It swings open under my touch, and I lurch out into the cool fresh air. The gravestones loom around me, and when I turn, I discover that I've been inside a tomb ... *Churchill Bradley's tomb!*

I thought the place was locked. How did he get the key to open it?

I'm still shaken at how the touch of the guy's fingers made my skin ignite with fire. Instead of making things better, it's only made them worse. My

breasts feel heavy and over-sensitive in my bra. The ache between my legs has lessened to a dull pulsing. I want to appease it but I can't.

He's watching me. He'll figure out if I make myself come and then he won't touch me tomorrow night like he promised. It's just twenty-four hours. I can do this.

By the time I reach Miles' room, I'm hot and bothered.

"Are you okay?" He opens his door to my knock. "You look a little flushed."

"I went for a quick run while the rain stopped."

"I got you a drink to go with your sandwich, and cake for afterward."

"Thanks."

I retake my place on the bed, and he hands me the packet of sandwiches. I don't even look to see what it is as I unseal the packet.

"Comfortable? Ready to watch the rest of the movie?"

I nod while I chew.

He presses start, and the movie bursts back into life, but I'm barely aware of it as my thoughts turn inward. My darer wanted me to answer his question, but he'd asked me so many, and I'm not sure I responded to all of them. I need to remember them all. Panic creeps over me.

What if I forget one? What if I don't remember?

He wanted to know what Miles had done five times.

What do I tell him? Would I have been thinking about him if it had actually happened and not been something I made up? Do I want him to lick me between my legs five times? Or give me five orgasms?

I shiver, recalling how our moans mingled when he touched me. The way he'd made me feel.

Yes, god help me, I do.

I want his mouth between my legs. I want to feel what it's like to orgasm that way.

I need his hand where it had been earlier.

He has to finish what he started.

Taking distracted bites from my sandwich, I formulate some answers that I hope will please him.

He wants me to say green, and right now, red doesn't even exist in my world.

CHAPTER 62

ELI

We spend Saturday evening in our room. Not that I have any choice since I'm not supposed to leave it until Monday. Kellan does a food run, bringing back a pile of snacks as well as a curry, with all its additions, in Tupperware containers and strict instructions to return it all to the cafeteria staff.

I don't tell him what happened with Arabella. I'm not sure why. It's not like we haven't shared girls before. Quite a few of the girls in our year have been on their knees or their backs for us. Not that any of them will admit to it. They prefer to keep us as their dirty little secret. A taste of the dark side that they're sure will get them ostracized if anyone finds out. It doesn't stop them from slinking back for more when the itch needs scratching though and, usually, we're more than happy to provide a service their jock boyfriends can't supply.

Stomach full and thirst satiated—at least one kind of thirst, anyway—I am sprawled on my bed, sketching, when there's a tap on the door. I look over at Kellan, who frowns.

"Expecting someone?"

He shakes his head. There's a second tap, followed by a female voice. "I know you're in there, Eli. Open the door."

I groan and drop my head against the pillow. "What the fuck does she want?"

Kellan swings his legs off the bed. "Only one way to find out." He crosses the room and throws open the door. "What?"

"I don't want to talk to you." Lacy pushes past Kellan, who steps back and lets her inside. She's not scared of him, which is a big mistake. I'm openly unpleasant, but Kellan will stab you while exchanging pleasantries with a smile on his face. It makes people underestimate him. "Eli!"

I roll onto my back. "What?"

"You are the only one not doing something for the Halloween dance."

"And?"

She drops onto the edge of the bed, near my feet. "I want you to paint a haunted house scene. Mr. McIntyre says if it's done in three pieces on large

sheets, we can fix it to the wall in the ballroom and then remove it once we're done."

On what fucking planet does she think I'm going to be amenable to her demands?

I throw an arm over my face, covering my eyes. "Suck my dick."

The mattress bounces and I smile behind my arm. Thank fuck for that. She's leaving. Except fingers slide beneath the waistband of my sweats. I recoil, eyes snapping open and my arm dropping away.

"What the actual fuck do you think you're doing?" I grab her wrist and shove it away from me.

"Sucking your dick."

Not much surprises me, but her response has my jaw dropping. I stare at her for a full ten seconds. "Get the fuck out of my room."

"But you said—"

"For fuck's sake, it wasn't a fucking request."

Kellan is laughing somewhere across the room. "You can suck my dick if you like, Lacy. Won't get you your mural painted, but ... you know ... if you're offering ..."

She turns pink, then red, then purple under our amused gazes. "I thought —"

"That blowing me was payment for the painting. Yeah, I figured that out for myself. Fuck off, Lacy." I roll onto my side, presenting her with my back.

"What do you want, then? There must be *something* I can give you to make you do it?"

"You have nothing I want." No lie there.

"What about one of the girls on the cheer squad? Pick one."

"Are you seriously sitting there pimping out your friends? Do they know you're prepared to sell them for what you want?" I twist back to face her. "And they call *me* the asshole."

She shrugs. "I want a mural, and you're the best artist in the school."

I sit up. "Tell you what. I'll think about it. If it turns out that you can supply something I want, I'll let you know."

She claps her hands together. "Fantastic. I knew you'd do it."

"I didn't say I'd do it."

Her smile is breezy. "Semantics." She hops to her feet and spins to face the door. "Later, boys!" She gives a cheery wave and skips out of the door.

I flop back onto the bed. “What the fuck was that?”

“A missed opportunity?”

“How so?”

“Lacy has her fingers in *all* the pies. She’s also Arabella’s roommate.”

“Hmmm.” I’d forgotten about that. Maybe she could give me something I want, after all. Something to think about, for sure.

And just like that, my thoughts go to Arabella, and the image of her grinding against my fingers does what Lacy’s attempt couldn’t. My dick wakes up and, ignoring the fact Kellan is right there, I shove a hand into my pants and curl my fingers around it.

“Oh, hello. Am I getting a show?”

My head rolls sideways to see Kellan lying on his side, head propped on one hand, watching me from his bed.

“I had my fingers in her pussy earlier. She was so fucking wet. So tight.” I stroke from base to tip and bite my lip to stop a groan from escaping. “I’ve told her to edge herself for the next twenty-four hours.”

My thumb sweeps over the head of my dick, smearing the precum around it. “She rode my hand like she was fucking desperate.” My eyes close and I lose myself to the sensations building as I pump up and down. “Lacy should have sent Arabella to convince me about the painting. Her mouth around my dick might have done the trick.”

And the image of her doing just that, those sweet plump lips, wet, willing, and sealed around my dick, take me over the edge. I throw my head back, gritting my teeth against the pleasure licking like flames through my veins.

My breathing is harsh as I ride through my orgasm.

“Fuck. If just the thought of her gets you off that fast, you’re going to be a two-second wonder when you finally get your dick inside her.” Kellan’s dry words break the spell, and my laughter fills the room.

I push myself off the bed, grab clean clothes and the burner cell, and head into the bathroom to shower. On the way, I fire off a text.

Me: Where are you?

Kitten: With Miles.

I grind my teeth.

Me: Go into his bathroom, pull down your panties, take yourself to the edge. DO NOT COME. Open yourself up and take a photograph. I want to see what tomorrow’s dessert looks like.

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CHAPTER 63

ARABELLA

Shock rocks through me.

Oh my god. He wants me to touch myself in Miles' bathroom and take a photograph. What will he do if I don't obey?

The thought of him not turning up tomorrow evening as he promised twists my stomach into anxious knots. I fidget with the cell phone, and glance nervously at Miles.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

His attention doesn't leave the laptop screen. "I can pause the movie."

"No, no. Keep it playing." I slide off the bed.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I've seen this movie a dozen times."

My cheeks are burning as I take my bag from the floor and carry it into the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I lock it and cross to the sink, I put my bag on the side and take a few deep breaths.

I just need to be quick. Miles will never know. I can't believe I'm going to do this.

Any hesitation in the back of my mind is squashed with the roar of need unfurling in my body. I want his mouth on my pussy. I'm going to explode if I don't get it. If I need to give him a photo to make that happen, then I'm going to do it. I just need to make sure no one can see it's me.

I push my sweats and panties down to my knees and take a seat on the edge of the bathtub. The white porcelain is cold against my skin as I spread my legs wide. Eyes closed, I run my hand downward, over my belly to the pubic hair covering my pussy. Slickness greets my fingers, and I'm shocked at how wet I am.

Why do things like this excite me? This should be wrong, yet I'm more aroused than I've ever been in my life.

I dip two fingers inside myself and mimic the movement of my darer's touch. It doesn't feel the same, but I ignore the jab of disappointment.

If I do what he wants, then tomorrow night, he'll do it for me.

A flood of fresh wetness coats my fingers, and my hunger for what he's offering grows. Sliding them out and up, I circle them around my clit. I

imagine I'm back in the tomb, and he has me pinned against the coffin, only this time, my hands are bound behind my back.

I rub myself, and rock forward, pretending he's whispering dirty things in my ear. How he wants me to come for him over and over. That he wants to kiss my pussy until I scream. I twist my head to the left, recalling the nip of his teeth along my jaw, the heat of his body pressed against mine.

What would it feel like to touch his dick? Would it be hard and hot to the touch?

I have to clench my teeth to swallow my moans.

Everything inside me tightens as an orgasm builds. I spread my thighs wider and fuck myself with the fingers of my other hand while I caress my clit faster and faster.

He ordered me not to come.

I whimper as the order slams into my mind, and my movements stop. Eyes opening, I release a shaky breath. I was so close to release.

I need to be a good girl.

I quickly wash my hands and retake my seat, grab the phone, unlock it and tap the camera. My face zooms into life, and for a second, I stare at myself. My lips are swollen from where I've been biting them, and my skin is flushed pink. There's a fevered look in my eyes that remind me of Elena when she'd been around her boyfriends. I shove the unsettling recollection aside, and lower the phone between my legs, and move it around, trying to find a good angle.

He told me to open myself up to him.

I use my fingers to spread my pussy lips wide and take a quick photograph. I close my legs and drop the photo into the cloud file using the link he sent me before I can change my mind.

Me: I did as you asked. The photo is with the other one.

I put the phone back on top of my bag, then pull up my panties and sweats.

The cell vibrates.

Unknown: Good girl. Remember not to touch yourself again, Kitten. I want you aching and wet for me tomorrow.

Me: Ok.

Unknown: And no letting Miles touch you before then. Understand? Green or red?

I smile and give him what he wants.

Me: Green.

I wash my hands a second time before drying them, and then leave the bathroom to find Miles exactly where I left him. When he doesn't look up, the tension in my shoulders ebbs.

I've just been naughty, and he has no idea. Joining him on the bed, I can't stop thinking about what will happen tomorrow night.

Will it just be him or his friend too? Is he looking at the photograph of my pussy right now? Is he touching himself?

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CHAPTER 64

ELI

“I should buy you a maid’s outfit.”

Kellan sets down the tray with my breakfast on it without a word, but I see the smirk curving his lips up as he turns away.

“Something skimpy,” I continue, investigating the covered plates. “With fishnets and high heels.”

“Are you feeling frisky this morning?” He drops onto his bed and bites into a slice of toast. “Have you been rummaging through my stuff? How do you know that’s what I plan to wear for Halloween?”

I choke on a mouthful of coffee. “You’re not serious?”

He shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not.” His teeth flash in a smile. “It’d be funny as fuck though, wouldn’t it?”

“Lacy would lose her shit.” Hmmm, Lacy. That reminds me of something, and I reach for my cell. Opening the school’s social media app, I find her name and open messages.

Me: Arabella has a diary. Find it for me and I’ll do your mural. Tell her, and I’ll ruin the entire evening.

Her response is a thumbs-up emoji and a heart.

Closing the app, I navigate to the cloud storage I set up and open the photograph Arabella sent me the night before. Her pussy is glistening, her clit peeking out of its hood. I wonder how many times she almost backed out before her need for praise overruled common sense. Because common sense should have had her refusing to send pussy pics to an unknown person over the internet. I wouldn’t send a dick pic to someone I didn’t know just because they asked for it.

I tap the screen, and enlarge the photograph, smiling at the beads of arousal evident on the fingers holding her pussy open. Her fingers are nestled in fine golden curls, and I make a mental note to take a pair of scissors with me later.

My smile widens as an idea comes to me, and I reach for the other cell.

Me: Where are you?

Prey: In bed.

Me: Get up, drop your pants, take a photograph of everything from the waist down. I want your pussy and legs front and center. You have twenty seconds.

Three dots appear, disappear, appear again, but no message comes through.

“Count to twenty.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Kellan huffs but does as I ask. When he reaches five, I receive a notification of a new file. I tap on it, and a photograph of Arabella’s lower half fills my screen.

Me: Good girl. Now the top half.

She sends one from the neck down. I’m fine with that. I’m not fine with the fact her nipples aren’t hard.

Me: Pinch your nipples. Make them hard. Unless you don’t want my mouth on you later. Do you want me to make you come, Kitten? Show me you want it.

The next image comes through quickly. This time her nipples are hard, pointed, slightly tilted just like I remember. Her skin is flushed, and I am sure her face will be bright red. Whether it’s from embarrassment or arousal, I don’t know. But I’m going to find out.

Me: Very nice. Now play with your pussy for me. Record it. When you’re about to come, stop. Lick your fingers clean, then send me the video.

I want to see what she likes, how she touches herself, what gives her the most pleasure. I’m also curious what her limit is. Sending photographs is one thing, but is she prepared to take it a step further? How desperate is she to have her pussy eaten by me?

I toss the cell onto my bed and finish eating breakfast, ignoring it when it vibrates with an incoming notification five minutes later. I’ll check what she’s sent me later.

I work on my art project until my alarm goes off. I still haven’t checked to see if Arabella followed my instructions. I’m testing my self-control, my willpower, to see how long I can ignore it. My gaze keeps drifting to the cell, and my fingers twitch, wanting to open the folder and see what she’s sent, if anything. But I don’t. I focus on the marble in front of me. It’s

starting to take shape and I can visualize how the completed piece will look. I still have a long way to go, but I'm confident in the design, and my ability to bring it to life.

At two, Kellan turns up and we walk back to the dorm, shadowed by a security guard. When we're inside and alone, he turns to me.

"How's the edging going?"

I smile. "She's been a good girl so far."

He snorts. "Are you really going to eat her pussy tonight?"

I give a careless shrug. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Do you want me to come along?"

I consider it, then shake my head. "Not tonight. Next time." Truth is, I don't want to share the first time I make her come for me.

"Eli ..." There's an odd hesitancy to Kellan's voice. He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. "Look, are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"I thought this was about driving her away. But you've got her panting for you. You jerked off over her. Are you sure you're not catching feelings?"

"Don't be stupid." I scowl at him. "But if she's offering her pussy to me on a platter, I'd be a fool to refuse. Tell me you aren't hungry for a taste of her. With the talents her mother has for snagging rich men, she must have some wicked skills of her own. I think it's only fair to sample them, don't you?"

"You're sure?"

"It'll just add to her humiliation when she realizes whose dick she's been begging to suck. Whose mouth made her come." I lick my lips, already savoring the evening ahead. "She won't be able to run out of here fast enough when she realizes that I played her at her own game and won."

I pull my cell out and tap into the cloud. Time to see what my little pussy cat has sent me.

CHAPTER 65

ARABELLA

Unknown number: Did you enjoy performing for me, Kitten? Did it excite you?

I drop the phone on my lap, and cover my face with my hands in mortification. He's made me wait all day for his reply, and I'd started to get nervous that one wasn't coming.

I still can't believe he made me do that. Lacy had been out early, and I locked the door to the room. I'd been careful only to show the lower half of my body and my mouth when recording. I feel dizzy, just remembering how I moaned and put on a good show for him.

As long as my identity is hidden, it will be fine. It could be anyone in those photos and videos. I just need to be careful. I can delete them from the cloud anytime.

But what if he downloads it?

I ignore the tiny seed of worry. I'll make sure this doesn't go too far. I can say red at any time and put a stop to it.

Knowing he's waiting for a response, I scoop up my phone and reply.

Me: Yes, it excited me.

Unknown number: You'll enjoy my mouth on you a lot more. Come to the bench an hour after curfew. Put your blindfold on and wait for instructions. Red or green?

Me: Green.

I rub a hand over my thigh, but it does nothing to dispel the nervous excitement.

"Arabella, are you okay? You look like you're going to puke," Linda calls.

I look in her direction, where the other cheerleaders are stretching. "Actually, I'm not feeling so good. Cramps. I might skip practice today."

Tina laughs, her hand falling to her hip. "Too much dick yesterday? I think the entire dorm building heard you and Miles at it."

"Weren't you almost caught banging a boy last term out in the woods?" Lacy pauses in the middle of her stretches to say sweetly. "You were moaning so loudly that security came running."

Tina's face turns cherry red.

"We never did find out who that was," my roommate muses. "Go right ahead, Arabella. You can make up for it after classes in the week."

Gathering my stuff, I make my way back to the dorm.

I check my phone from under the covers. A frisson of adrenaline rushes through me when I see the time. Lacy is fast asleep, and I've been lying on my bed waiting for hours.

I crawl off the mattress, find my sneakers and fanny pack, then tiptoe across the room. I'm out of the door before nervousness can get the better of me.

I keep to the shadows once I'm outside, and I'm just about to break into a run when I see movement to my right. I freeze and flatten myself against the wall. A pair of students come into view. Huddled together, they hurry across the grass to the other end of the campus.

Not to the woods.

Relief unlocks my muscles. I wait until they've vanished, and I'm more cautious as I sprint for the trees. The rest of the run is a blur, and before I know it, I'm standing in front of the bench. My heart is racing, and butterflies fill my stomach. I tug out the blindfold and put it on.

I don't move. Don't breathe. Listening to the silence and every tiny sound that breaks it.

"Ready to play, Kitten?" The voice is so close to my ear that it makes me jump.

I nod. "Yes."

He gives a soft laugh. "So eager. But you still have to answer my question from earlier. No orgasms if you can't remember."

"Miles made me come five times using his mouth." I shift from side to side as I spin the lie. "Yes, I was thinking about *you* when he did it, and yes, I want you to lick me five times between my legs."

Fingers curl around my bicep in a hard, unyielding grip. I have no choice but to move when he drags me forward.

"Duck your head."

Stooping at the warning, I stagger forward.

He's taken me to the tomb again.

A gloved hand wraps around my throat, and my breath hitches. "You want my hands and mouth on your body out here in the dark? You want me

to make you come? A stranger you know nothing about? That's not what good girls wish for, Kitten."

Something hard pokes into my hip. A hot, heady awareness replaces my panic. "I can be good for *you*."

The tip of his tongue flicks my earlobe. "Then take off your clothes and show me. Red or green?"

"Green."

"Strip," he rasps. Arms wrap around me, and he holds me tightly against him. "I want you barefoot, in nothing but your bra and panties."

The exhale of his breath brushes against my skin and tugs low in my groin. When he steps back, my legs go weak.

A slither of uncertainty splinters the lusty daze in my brain. "N-no sex."

"You haven't earned my dick yet, Kitten." There's an amused note to his whisper.

He moves away, and I lift my top over my head with shaking fingers. I manage to get it off without dislodging my blindfold. Cool air sends goosebumps rippling over my flesh. With slow, jerky movements, I kick off my sneakers and strip out of my sweats.

Straightening and battling against the urge to cover myself, I listen to the silence.

Is he still there?

I part my lips to ask, but the heat of a body pressing itself to my back makes me gasp.

A hand settles on my hip before slipping beneath the hem of my panties. "Red or green?"

"Green." Before I'm fully conscious of what I'm doing, I tilt my pelvis forward, desperate for him to touch me where I need.

My brain goes haywire with the overload of sensation.

"Please." The word comes out in a needy whimper.

Can he feel how fast my heart is beating? Does he know how wet I am?

His arousal pokes my ass, and I'm in agony as he slowly grinds himself against me. I can't think.

Oh, god, why does that feel so good?

His teeth bite down on my shoulder, and I groan at the sharp spike of pain.

Please.

The word echoes inside my head and I rock back into him in desperation.

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CHAPTER 66

ELI

From where I'm standing behind her, I can see her nipples pressing against the lace of her bra, feel her hips rocking forward as she seeks out my fingers. I don't move. I have one hand cupping her pussy and the other is pressing against her stomach, holding her in place against me. Not that she's fighting to escape. If anything, she's doing the opposite. She's desperate to be touched. Her body is trembling. With arousal? With fear? Maybe a mixture of the two, making it a heady combination that drives my own lust.

She said no sex. I'm not going to try and convince her otherwise. My plan has never included fucking her, although the thought of it has become a temptation that's hard to ignore. But there's something nagging at me, like a red flag at the edge of my mind warning me. The way she talks about Miles eating her pussy. Something about it sets my teeth on edge. How did she word it?

I think over the conversation. That's right. He licked her between the legs five times. There's something off about that description. I just can't pinpoint what it is. It's a puzzle for another time. Not for now when she's almost naked, very wet, and definitely willing. I pull my hand free from her pants, and smile at her whimper of protest.

"Don't panic, Kitten. We just need to change position." I move to stand in front of her and look her over. Her curves, usually hidden by her yoga pants and hoodies, are on full display. Full breasts, trim waist curving into hips that won't break when I hold onto them. Her ass is nicely rounded, and I can't wait to sink my teeth into it.

"Take two steps back. You'll feel the stone behind you. Put your hands on it and climb up so you can sit down."

She feels behind her as she moves, and awkwardly climbs on top of the coffin. The slab sealing Churchill inside is flat and puts her at the perfect height for what I'm about to do.

"Open your legs." I slide one hand over her knee and step between her thighs. "Lay back."

Her breasts move with her quick breaths, but she does as I say. "I'm taking some photographs of you. You can look at them later. You're spread out like a willing sacrifice." I lower my head and brush my lips over her hip. She jumps. "And I'm the monster you've summoned to feast on you." I let out a heated breath and press a kiss to the cotton of her panties.

Her breath hitches. I hook my fingers into the elastic and slowly drag it down. "I'm going to take your panties off now. Red or green, Kitten?"

"Gr-green."

"Lift your ass." I pull them down her legs slowly, stepping back so I can crouch and free them. They drop to the ground.

My hands stroke over her thighs down to her knees, and I push her legs further apart. "Stay just like that." I take five photographs, careful to keep her face out of them. I avoid thinking about why I protect her identity, and instead focus on the way her tits are spilling out of her bra, the way her fingers are curled into loose fists, and the way her pussy is soaking wet.

"How do you feel, Kitten, knowing that I'm looking at you? Does it feel good displaying yourself like this? Does it make you feel like a good girl?"

Pink darkens her cheeks, but she doesn't answer me. I walk around the coffin, stop beside her head and lean forward to rest my lips against her ear. "How many good girls do you know who get their pussy out in a cemetery and beg to be licked until they come?" I whisper. "Take off your bra."

"I n-need to sit up to do it."

"Sit up, then, but don't close your legs. I want your pussy on show at all times tonight. Keep them wide. Give old Lord Churchill something nice to dream about. This is probably the most action he's seen in centuries."

I move to where I've stowed my bag and crouch while she divests herself of the last remaining item of clothing and take out a pair of scissors. When I turn back, she's completely naked.

"Put your hands behind your back. Keep those legs open." I snap another photograph. "Good girl. Onto your back again now." I step between her legs and run the scissors over her stomach.

"Wait. What's that?" Fear tenses her muscles.

"You're a little late being scared. You've finger-fucked yourself for me, sent me photographs of your pussy, and you're spread out like a banquet in the middle of the night waiting for me to feast on you. And *now* you're scared I might kill you?" I stroke a finger over her pussy. "Don't be scared, Kitten. I just want to get rid of some of this." I tug on the hair between her

legs. “I don’t mind a little fur, but ...” I snip away the curl I’m holding, then another and another until the hair between her legs is neatly trimmed. Setting the scissors to one side, I spread her open and pat her clit with two fingers. She jolts backward. “Now then ... What did you say he did? Licked you five times?”

“Y-yes.”

I peel my ski mask up over my mouth and nose, then lower my head. The first swipe of my tongue drags a sharp gasp out of her.

“That’s one.” I lick her again, avoiding her clit. “That’s two.” My third lick ends with my tongue dipping inside her, and her hips rise. “How many is that, Kitten?”

“Th-three?”

Lick number four sweeps over her clit and she hisses.

“Count.”

“Four!”

I lift my head, looking up her body. Her nipples are hard, her teeth are biting into her bottom lip. I smile. “Ready?” I press my lips to her pussy and suck her clit into my mouth. Her long-drawn-out moan as I flick over it with the tip of my tongue heats my blood, but I force myself to step away, and wipe my mouth. “There you go. You can go back to your dorm now.”

“Wh-what?”

“That’s what you wanted. You said you wanted me to lick you five times between the legs. We both counted. That’s what you got.”

My dick is screaming at me, demanding to know what the fuck I am playing at. But this is my game and my rules, and if she thinks she is going to make me jealous by having her boyfriend make her come and then expect me to compete ... Well, now she knows better.

I grab my bag and slip out of the tomb. When I’m safely back in the tunnel I drop her a text.

Me: Next time you want to play, don’t come to me after someone else’s tongue has been on your body.

CHAPTER 67

ARABELLA

Yanking the blindfold off my face, I scramble off the coffin. Tears of humiliation sting my eyes, spilling free to run down my cheeks. I shiver, find my bra and panties and put them on with trembling hands. Throat aching, I sob as I gather the rest of my clothes.

I'm an idiot. I shouldn't have come here. Now he has pictures of me naked. Oh god, did they include my face? I must be a masochist. A stupid masochist!

I drag on my sweats and t-shirt, and stuff my feet into my sneakers. Bag located, I ignore it when the cell inside buzzes. Scurrying for the door, I push it open and run.

I did what he said, and he tricked me.

Tears blur my vision, but I keep on running.

Was it some kind of punishment? Why? What did I do?

I move blindly. My foot hits something solid, and I trip. My reactions are not quick enough to stop myself from hitting the ground, and my forehead connects with something hard with a sickening crack. Light explodes before my eyes, and I cry out in pain.

Dazed and confused, I lie still, my heavy breath swirling the dirt by my mouth. Rolling onto my back, I stare up at the dark canopy of branches. When I touch my forehead, my fingertips come away, streaked in something dark. Fresh tears fill my eyes, the agony in my head making me feel nauseous.

I should have been more careful and looked where I was going. I just wanted to get away from what happened.

I get to my feet, the world spinning as I stand. One arm wrapped around my stomach for comfort, I limp toward the lights of the school. When I hit the tree line, I don't speed up my pace. My head hurts. All I want to do is hide under my covers and take some painkillers.

I'm almost at the dorm building when a beam of light hits me.

"Don't move."

I stop at the booming voice and turn. A security guard is striding toward me. Stomach churning, all I can do is watch him come closer with a sense

of impending doom.

He stops in front of me and scrutinizes my expression. “Care to explain what you’re doing outside after lights-out?”

My gaze drops to the floor. “Um...” I swallow. “I got a dare to run to the cemetery and back after curfew.”

He jerks his chin at my forehead. “You hurt yourself?”

I touch the painful throbbing just above my right eye and wince. “I stumbled on a root.”

“You’re bleeding, and it looks like you’re going to have one hell of a bruise. We should get that checked out.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“I’m going to have to report this.” He gestures toward the main building. “Come on, let’s get you patched up and make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

CHAPTER 68

ELI

Sleep eludes me for most of the night. Every time I close my eyes, she's there in my mind. I can hear her soft sighs, her moans, feel the warmth of her skin against mine, taste her on my lips. By the time morning rolls around, I'm gritty-eyed, tired, and irritable. I opt for a cold shower, which doesn't help the hard-on I've been fighting to subdue since leaving Arabella in the tomb.

I can't summon up anything more than a grunt in response to Kellan's yawned "morning" as I drag on clothes and head down for breakfast. It's only when I drop on the seat at my chosen table that I feel the atmosphere in the room. The conversation is more muted than usual, the girls on the cheer squad whispering to each other instead of laughing and teasing. The football team, seated close by, is also quiet as they focus on eating their breakfast instead of flirting with the girls.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Something isn't right, and an odd sense of relief sweeps through me when Kellan arrives, with a tray filled with toast and coffee, and flops down on the opposite side of the table.

"Do you know what's going on?"

His eyes narrow and he straightens, looking around quickly, then leans forward. "You haven't heard?"

"If I'd heard, I wouldn't be asking."

"Someone was caught doing a dare last night. Word is they hurt themselves and ended up spending the night in medical. Warren is ordering everyone to the main hall before school starts to lecture us about being out after curfew."

"Because that'll work as well as it has every other year."

Kellan doesn't laugh. "Whoever it was got hurt in the cemetery, Eli."

Tension zips down my spine. I hadn't stayed to make sure Arabella got back safely. I'd needed to put space between us before I ignored her request and fucked her. The first taste of her almost unraveled my control, and I'd grabbed the first excuse I could think of to get out before I broke my word.

There. I admit it to myself. I didn't stop to torment her and punish her for letting Miles do what I wanted to do. I stopped because if I hadn't, things

would have gone a lot further than she wanted.

I pull out the cell and tap into messages. She hasn't responded to the one I left last night.

Me: Where are you?

I scan the cafeteria. She's not there. I can see Lacy, Tina, Linda, and the other girls, but no Arabella.

Me: Kitten, where are you?

She doesn't reply, and she doesn't turn up for breakfast. When a couple of teachers appear in the doorway to tell us to go to the main hall, I look for her. She usually catches up with her roommate before the first class, so I purposely choose a seat close behind Lacy.

"Quiet down, everyone." Principal Warren makes his way onto the stage. "I'll make this quick. It's been brought to my attention that, regardless of my warnings *not* to engage in dares, some of you have carried them out anyway. Last night one of our students got hurt. Because of this, we'll be doubling the security and setting curfew for all years at nine-thirty, starting tonight."

Groans and complaints drown out the rest of his words. A whistle pierces the noise, and everyone turns to look at the front of the room. Coach Braun has his football whistle between his lips.

"Sit down and shut up," he bellows, and everyone slowly settles back down.

"As I was saying, curfew for the entire school will now be nine-thirty. That is the only restriction I'm placing you all on ... for the moment. But if you continue to ignore my warnings about these dares, I *will* reconsider, and the Halloween party will be canceled." He steps back. "That's it. Get to your classes everyone."

I hold back until most of the others have left and pull out the cell. She still hasn't replied.

Me: If you are giving me the silent treatment because I left you last night, I can think of more interesting ways to punish me.

Prey: Leave me alone.

I frown at the name I've given her. It doesn't suit her anymore. I navigate into the contacts and change it before replying.

Me: No. Where are you?

Kitten: You left me alone in a tomb naked. Anyone could have seen me. I'm done. Red. RED. RED!

Me: So, you're not angry that I left you on the edge, just that you were on your own in the tomb?

Kitten: Don't message me again.

I glance up to check who's around and turn into the hallway where the lockers are.

Me: What if I promise not to leave you like that again?

Kitten: I said leave me alone.

Me: Did you look at the photographs?

Three little dots pop up, disappear, and pop up again.

Kitten: You uploaded them?

Me: I told you I'd let you see them. You looked fucking amazing. Take a look. Then tell me you're done.

I turn off the cell and open my locker to grab my books, then set off for math.

CHAPTER 69

ARABELLA

Wiping away the stray tear that's rolling down my cheek with my thumb, I turn off the phone. I'm feeling sorry for myself, and I don't even want to think about looking at those photos. Not now when I feel so low. I'm a mess inside.

I rest my head back on the pillow, my attention wandering aimlessly around the long room. Rows of empty beds are lined on both sides, and the odor of antiseptic lingers in the air. The nurse is sitting at a table by the door, working away on her computer. She checked on me on and off all night. The painkillers I'd been given have helped.

I've already had a visit from the principal this morning to inform me that my mother has been notified about my accident. He wanted to see the dare, but I told him I'd destroyed the note.

I can only imagine what Elena will think. Maybe she won't care at all.

A text alert sounds. Checking my normal phone, there's a message from Miles waiting for me.

Miles: Lacy said you weren't in your room when she woke up this morning. You're not in math. Where are you?

Me: I'm in medical.

The dots jump up and down.

Miles: OMG, are you okay? The principal said someone got hurt doing a dare.

I catch my appearance in the reflection of the screen. The nasty cut slashes across the corner of my forehead beneath the narrow white adhesive strips. It's nestled in an ugly spreading purple welt.

Tearing my attention away from the bruise, I focus on my cell phone and text Miles.

Me: I fell and banged my head. I'm lucky I didn't knock myself out. The good news is that I probably don't have a concussion, but they kept me in here for observation overnight.

Miles: Why didn't you tell me you had a dare?

Me: I thought no one was supposed to talk about them.

We message back and forth until my head starts to hurt. I set my phone aside, snuggle under the blanket and close my eyes.

When I open them again, Miles and Lacy are standing at the end of the bed, wearing matching expressions of concern.

I ease myself up carefully into a sitting position. “What time is it?”

“Lunch time,” my roommate informs me. “There’s an only two visitors at a time rule. The others had to wait outside.”

I must have slept and not realized it.

“I bought you some chocolate to cheer you up.” Miles’ brows are drawn tight over worried eyes as he hands me a Hershey bar.

It’s my favorite flavor, which makes me smile. “Thanks.”

“We’re not allowed to stay longer than a couple of minutes,” he tells me. “But if you need anything, text me, okay?”

Plucking up the chart hanging from the end of my bed, Lacy inspects it. “You need to rest. The nurse said you can leave this evening, so I’ll come and walk you back to the dorm after dinner.”

I fidget with the edge of the chocolate bar, turning it over in my hands. “I’m okay to do it alone.”

She rolls her eyes. “And what if you collapse? I would be the worst roommate ever if that happened. No. You wait for me to come and get you. I have a Halloween-related thing to sort out before I’m free, but I will be here.”

The nurse appears, carrying a tray and chases them out. Once they’re gone, I’m given a painkiller and left to eat my meal in peace.

The day drags, and I sleep some more, only to be awakened by the sound of my phone. I check the caller’s ID and groan a second before answering it.

“Hey, Elena—”

My mother talks over my greeting. “We got a phone call this morning telling us you had an accident.”

It’s three in the afternoon, and she’s waited all this time to contact me. Did she spend all morning nursing another hangover?

“I’m okay—”

“Do you know how much it’s costing for you to attend the academy? I expected better from you.”

Guilt sends my stomach tumbling off a cliff into a sickly plunge. “I’m sorry.”

“Elliot was ready to drive down there, but I assured him you’d be fine.” Her words are cold and sharp. “You’re a big girl and old enough to take care of yourself.”

Bitterness rises in my throat, but I hold back my hot, angry words. I’ve been taking care of myself since I was six. I cleaned up her messes and fed us both, been the adult she should have been, but I don’t remind her of that. “Yes, Elena.”

“I have to go. My yoga class is starting. I’ll call you over the weekend.”

The line goes dead, leaving me in painful silence and hate.

“Are you okay? Do you need to lean on me for support?”

We’re walking slowly across the campus. I shake my head, wincing when it hurts.

“Honestly, I’m fine. They gave me painkillers for my head, and my knee is just a little scraped up.”

Curfew is approaching, and students are wandering toward the dorm. People are looking our way and others whispering when we pass. It’s enough to have my anxiety up and my palms sweaty.

My gaze collides with a pair of green eyes.

Eli.

He’s with Kellan, and we’re coming from opposite directions toward the dorm building.

He stares at me with such intensity that it creeps me out. Maybe he’s disappointed that I didn’t break my neck. I’m sure that would have given him some sick kind of satisfaction.

Ducking my head, I hunch my shoulders and keep my attention on the ground. I don’t look up until we reach our room.

“You don’t need to worry about cheer practice,” Lacy says. “I’ll let you take a few days off before you get back to it.”

I unlock our room door, and almost trip over something on the floor. Fingers grab my arm, steadying me as I sway.

“Are you okay?” Lacy lets go of me.

“I think so.” My attention dips to the giant bouquet of white flowers lying at my feet. I frown, bend down and search for a card but find nothing.

Lacy closes the door behind us. “Lilies? Really? And how the hell did someone get them in here? The door was locked. I bet they got security to help them.”

Lifting the bouquet, I carry it to my bed. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They remind me of the funeral home when my grandma died.” She shudders. “Those things were everywhere.”

“Maybe they’re from Miles?” Digging my phone out of a pocket, I shoot off a text.

Me: Thanks for the flowers :)How did you leave them in our room?

He answers immediately.

Miles: Flowers?

Me: The lilies.

Miles: They weren’t from me. Maybe you’ve got a secret admirer?

My darer? Could he feel guilty about what happened?

Finding his phone in my bag, I curl my fingers around it. “I’m going to have a bath.”

Lacy glances up from where she’s perched on the end of her bed, texting. “Shout if you feel faint or sick.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” I walk into the bathroom, close the door and lock it.

I start the bath running and add plenty of bubble bath. While the tub fills with water, I turn on the phone and click on the link that takes me to the cloud. The photos of me are there, just as he promised. My relief is sharp when I see he’s left my face out of focus.

Is that really me?

There’s a feminine form spread out on top of the coffin. My naked body is on display for him to see, and the thought sends a dart of something dark and forbidden right through me. I can see the glistening moisture of arousal between my spread legs and the taut peaks of my nipples.

He did that to me. Got my body excited. Got me excited.

I remember the way his mouth had felt. His lapping tongue sent darts of pleasure through me. I bite my lip, staring at the image, the insidious needy thrum reawakening inside me.

For one brief moment, I hadn’t played by the rules. I wasn’t the girl who kept her head down and worked hard. I did something different. Something *daring*. I deviated from the path of study and hard work. I chose the thrill of doing something I wasn’t supposed to.

I took a risk.

I liked it.

Do I really have the courage to face him again?

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CHAPTER 70

ELI

“So, you’re going to paint the mural?” Lacy’s fingers cling to the notebook she’s holding.

“That was the deal.” I hold out my hand. “Is that it?”

“Why do you want it?”

“None of your business. Do you want the mural or not?” The question hangs between us, and I wonder, for a second, whether she’s developing a conscience. But then she shrugs and slaps the book onto my palm.

“I do. I know who she is to you, you know.”

I go still, and slowly lift my gaze to meet hers.

“What is there to know?”

Has she seen me going out after curfew? Has Arabella told her what she’s been doing, and Lacy figured it out?

“She’s your sister.”

The tension in my spine relaxes. “*Stepsister.*”

“Same thing.”

“No, not really.” If I had a real sister, there is no fucking way I’d even think about the things I want to do to Arabella.

“Is that why you hate her? Has daddy put her in his will, halving your inheritance?”

I snort. “I hate everyone, Lacy. Haven’t you noticed that?”

“You don’t hate me.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No way. Your dick doesn’t lie, Eli.”

I grab her hand and press it against the front of my pants. “What’s my dick telling you now, *Lacy*?”

She squeezes, frowns when I don’t get hard, and then purses her lips.

“I’ll tell you, so you don’t have to burn out any more brain cells. You can’t afford the loss. There’s a reason we fucked once, and I didn’t come back to repeat the experience.”

“Because I have a boyfriend.”

I pat her cheek. “Sure. *That’s* the reason. Thanks for the diary. Now fuck off.” I start to close the door.

“Wait! The mural?”

“You’ll have it in time for your stupid party.” I shut the door in her face and turn, slapping the book against my palm. I want to read it, but I need to get some work done on my sculpture before curfew. I tuck the diary under my bed with the other one, grab a hoodie and leave the room, making sure the door is locked behind me.

“You’re staring.”

My eyes snap to Kellan. “What?”

“I said you’re staring ... like a creeper.”

“No, I’m not.” But my gaze drifts back to where Arabella sits with her back to me beside Miles a few rows away. We’re sitting on the bleachers, at Kellan’s insistence, while the football team practices on the field below.

It’s been a week since I left her in the tomb, and she hurt herself. A week since she told me to leave her alone. A week since she stopped responding to my texts.

“Yes, you are. And they’ve noticed. Thankfully, you look more crazy than lovesick.”

“Fuck you. Why are we here anyway? I fucking hate football.”

“It was either sit here or get roped into helping with the Halloween dance decorations.” He opens a bottle of Coke and hands it to me. “I think I’m broken.”

That catches my attention, and I turn to look at him. “Broken?”

“Yeah.” He waves a hand toward Miles, who has his face buried into Arabella’s hair. “I was *sure* he was gay.”

“Really?” I glance over at him, lip curling as he brushes her hair away from her throat and places a kiss just below her ear. “Considering the moans he was pulling out of her the other week, he’s either straight or bi.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

I pull out my cell and open the texts.

“I think she’s done, Eli.” He jerks his chin toward where the pair of them are now giggling, their heads close together.

“She’ll be back. There’s a darkness inside her. She won’t be able to resist.”

“Oh, I think she’ll resist. Girls will only take so much shit before they decide they’ve had enough.”

I scroll through the messages I've sent her. All of them are still marked as unread.

"She's not going to answer."

"I apologized for leaving her there."

Kellan laughs. "Eli, you took her to the tomb, made her strip, gave her a ... a *pussicure*, then took—"

"What the fuck is a pussicure?"

"Like a manicure, only for pussies. You gave her a trim ... without asking first, I should add. Then you took photographs, and *then* you didn't even give her an orgasm before you walked out and left her alone in the fucking cemetery in the dark. On what planet is she going to come back for more after that?"

"I did exactly what she asked me to do."

He groans. "I'm pretty sure she didn't ask you to humiliate her."

"Didn't she?" My eyes are on her again. Miles' arm is around her and her head is resting against his shoulder. "Hey, Cavanagh!" I call.

Kellan's head sinks into his hands beside me. "You're fucking on self-destruct," he mutters.

I ignore him.

"Cavanagh!" I shout louder, and he twists around to look at me.

"Make sure you buy some mouthwash. Fuck knows what you're going to catch from your skanky girlfriend's pussy if you eat it too often. Like mother, like daughter, you know? Happy to open their legs for the highest bidder."

His face turns red, and he starts to stand. Arabella clutches his arm and shakes her head.

I smirk. "Pussywhipped as well, huh? Easy to see who the man in your relationship is. Is her dick bigger than yours? Is that why you're hot for her? Who fucks who?"

This time he shakes her off when he stands and comes toward me. I rise to meet him.

"Don't talk about Bella like that!"

"Who's gonna stop me? *You*? Fuck off back to the pool, merman. You haven't got the balls to do anything about it."

His fingers curl into fists. I lift my chin. "Want to hit me? Do it. I'll give you the first punch for free." A smile pulls my lips up. "But once you've taken your shot, it's my turn. Keep that in mind."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Arabella scrambling up the bleachers. The bruise on her forehead is fading, mostly yellow now, but it twists something in my stomach to see it. It wouldn't have happened if I'd stayed.

"Here she comes. Your knight in shining ..." I glance at her. "In cheerleader colors. Could your skirt get any shorter, Princess? Good thing you're wearing panties; otherwise, your pussy would be open season. Thank fuck you don't prefer thongs like Lacy. No one needs to see that."

She turns pink and puts a hand on Miles' arm. "Let's go."

"Yeah, *Miles*, run away with your little princess." I turn my gaze to her. "I'll see *you* in English, Princess. Don't be late. You won't want to miss today's class."

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CHAPTER 71

ARABELLA

Miles takes a step closer to Eli, but I grab his hand. “Don’t. He’s not worth it.”

He’s not listening to me. I can feel the tension radiating through his body. I know all he wants to do is defend me, but I don’t want him to get in trouble.

My gaze connects with Eli’s. “He just wants a reaction because that’s how he gets attention in his sad little life.”

My stepbrother bores a hole in my head, his eyes filled with nothing but venom and malice. Everything inside me wants to shrink away, but I hold my ground instead.

I tug on Miles’ hand. “Don’t give him what he wants.”

His shoulders relax an inch. “You’re right. He isn’t worth it.”

Not waiting for a reply from Eli, we make our way down the bleachers. Miles keeps his arm around my waist, and I lean into it for support.

“What the hell did he mean by not missing English?”

I don’t look back, sensing Eli still watching us and not wanting to give him an opportunity to launch into another verbal attack. “He probably just wanted to rattle me.”

“I don’t like the way he keeps staring at you.”

“Maybe he’s into *you*, and he’s not actually looking at me,” I joke with a weak smile.

Miles shudders. “That would give me nightmares.”

What does Eli mean about English?

Uneasiness niggles at my mind. The question nags at me, unleashing a whirlwind of anxious emotions that threatens to turn me inside out. There have been daggers in his eyes every time I’ve made eye contact with him this week. It seems like he’s gone out of his way to creep me out more than usual. I have no idea what triggered it.

What did I do to piss him off more than just being here?

My worries and doubts merge together, joining my concern over my new diary. I haven’t been able to find it all week, and I’m sure I left it under my

mattress. I've even asked Lacy if she moved it when she was tidying the room, but she says she's seen no sign of it.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that the impact of something hard slamming into my shoulder sends me stumbling forward down the steps. I can't stop my momentum. My vision blurs, blood pounds in my ears, and I'm back in the woods in the dark.

Miles' arm shoots out, preventing me from taking a nosedive down the bleacher.

"Watch where you're fucking going," Eli snaps as he passes us.

Kellan gives me a smirk as he follows after him.

"The bastard did that on purpose," Miles growls. "Are you okay? You've lost all the color in your face."

Hands trembling, light-headedness turns my knees to jelly. My friend swears under his breath, and the next thing I know, I'm sitting down.

Nausea rolls in my stomach, and I clench my hands so tightly that my nails dig into my palms.

"Deep breaths," Miles encourages. "In and out slowly."

I do as he says, breathing in through my nose and release it in one long exhale through my mouth, until the panic attack subsides.

"Do you want me to take you to the nurse?"

I force down the lump in my throat. "No, I'll be okay. He just scared me."

My gaze locks on Eli and Kellan who are skirting around the edge of the field. Neither of them looks back.

Thanking the lunch lady when she places a plate of mac and cheese on my tray, I file out of the line. I add a bottle of orange juice to it before heading for my table. Evan and Linda are already there. The others haven't arrived yet.

My earlier panic attack has drained the energy out of me. I've had trouble concentrating in class all day. It's poisoned my mood and left me feeling restless.

You could always check for messages. You know he might have left some.

I resist the temptation to look and see if my darer has been in contact. It's been a week since I last responded to him. Seven whole days of me having the willpower to keep away from trouble. I just need to get back on track

with my life. Keep to my twenty-year plan. If I funnel all this pent-up frustration into my designs, it will give them a new edge.

Sixth sense tingling with danger, I turn.

The tray in my hands is thrust upward and out of my grip. It hits the ground at my feet with a clatter, and I watch in horror as my food splatters in a mess all over my shoes. Hesitantly, I raise my eyes to the person responsible.

“Bitches eat their dinner off the floor, like the rest of the dogs,” Eli taunts.

He gives me one of those stares that make the hair on my arms stand on end.

My heart stops, and everything inside me turns cold. Tears threaten, but somehow, I manage to keep them at bay. I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

I clench my jaw instead. “Why can’t you just fuck off and leave me alone?”

Eli laughs, the sound harsh. “Where would the fun be in that, *Princess*.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Bitter amusement passes through his gaze, but he doesn’t reply as he strolls away from me.

Aware of the other students watching, I crouch down to rescue the tray and plate. A second later, Linda and Evan arrive to help me with handfuls of paper towels to clean up the mess.

A tiny fissure cracks through the wall within me, and a curl of rage seeps free.

CHAPTER 72

ELI

I have a free study hour before English, so I use it to work on the mural for Lacy. To begin with, she insists on being there, overseeing everything I do, describing her *vision* for the mural. By the end of day two, stabbing her with a craft knife is looking tempting, so I threaten to quit if she doesn't fuck off and leave me to work. The three days following are better. Without her there to interrupt me, I work faster.

She wants a haunted house scene, which is simple enough and doesn't take much thought on my part. I base it on the school and surrounding grounds and amuse myself by adding the faces of students to the various people. Jace is being pinned to the wall by Sam, the pumpkin-headed villain from *Trick 'r Treat*. Miles is being held underwater in the small pond in front of the building by Jigsaw. Lacy can be seen through one of the windows, the figure of Michael Myers from *Halloween* behind her. And Arabella? Well, she's ducking behind a gravestone in the small cemetery to the left of the school. Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is behind her, his bladed gloved hand wrapped around her throat.

There are other horror movie villains dotted around the painting—Pennywise from *IT*, Jason Vorhees from *Friday the 13th*, and Ghostface from *Scream*. I've even thrown in Leatherface from the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the doll from *Chucky*.

I'm putting the finishing touches on a werewolf slinking through the trees, its eyes focused on Arabella, when my alarm goes off to tell me it's time to clean up and get ready for the final class of the day.

Anticipation unfurls in the pit of my stomach. I've been looking forward to this class all day. All *week*, in fact. I wash up my brushes and prop the canvas against the wall before locking up the room and heading to my locker to grab my stuff. Kellan is there, leaning against the wall, arms folded as he watches me walk toward him. He straightens once I reach him.

"You're set on this course of action?"

I open my locker and pull out my books. "Yes."

"There are better ways to get her attention."

"I don't want her attention."

He laughs. "Do you even believe what you're saying?"

I slice an irritated glance at him. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Eli, you didn't work this hard to piss her off before she stopped responding to your texts. You half-assed getting her to leave the school. I'm not sure your heart was ever really in it. But now? Now, you're upping your game. And why? The only thing that makes sense is you're punishing her for ignoring you." He keeps pace beside me. "I can't decide whether that's funny or fucked up, because ... and this might come as a shock to you. She doesn't fucking know you're her dark little addiction."

"She could have found out easily enough."

"I might be wrong, but I'm pretty sure asking '*who are you*' comes under the attempting to find out scenario."

"She doesn't want to *know* who I am. That's kinda the point. She gets off on fooling around in the dark with a stranger."

"And *you're* getting off on being that stranger, which is why you're so fucking angry now. Your little toy doesn't want to play anymore."

"She's not my toy. I'm doing this for one reason. I want her to fuck off out of my school, out of my family, and out of my life."

He pats my shoulder as we enter the classroom. "Keep telling yourself that. We both know you're lying. I haven't seen you this invested in someone since ... Well, *never*. If you were really pissed off about her mom marrying your dad, you wouldn't be ignoring the obvious source of the issue and focusing on the one that had no say in it."

We cross the room to our desks, and I sling my bag beneath it.

"My theory is she made your dick hard the first second you met her," Kellan continues in a low voice. "I get that it's messed with your head but punishing her for something she has no control over is crazy, even by my standards."

He's not wrong. I *know* that. I just don't care. I walked away from her last weekend, so I could keep my word and not fuck her. And now she's attempting to punish *me* by ignoring me. Fuck that. If she wants to play the game this way, then I'm all in.

The rest of the students pile in, the noise levels rising as they take their seats and pull out books.

"Alright, class. Quiet down." Mr. Bellamy walks in. "We only have an hour, so let's get straight into it. At the beginning of the week, I asked you all to write three paragraphs of emotive writing. I told you to dig deep and

write a piece about how you feel about something, *anything*. How did you do? Who wants to get up and read one out to me?"

There are mumbles and shuffled feet as everyone looks around, hoping someone else is picked so they don't have to. I wait, letting the anxiety of the class rise, and then stand up.

"Mr. Travers? You're taking the hit? Good man! Get up here." He throws me a smile. "That's what I like to see."

I flip open my book as I walk to the front of the class and lean against Mr. Bellamy's desk facing everyone. My gaze roams the room. Kellan is smirking. Jace and Evan are leaning close together laughing, not paying me any attention. Linda has her head propped on her chin and is looking right at me, a suggestive smile teasing her lips. I shift my attention from her to the blonde head next to her. Arabella's eyes are wide, bottom lip caught between her teeth, and she stares at me. Something sparks between us. An awareness. A heat that I can almost touch.

I smile, my eyes holding hers as I lift the book. I don't even need to look down at it. I have the words memorized.

"What does it feel like to be loved? To have someone who cares? Someone who notices when you're happy or sad? How does it feel to know someone is there when you need to talk?"

"Does it feel like the warmth of the sun as it kisses your skin, only to leave you cold when it hides behind a cloud? Or is it like the heat from the shower? Maybe it's like fire, burning you. Does that kind of love scar you for life?"

"In my dreams, I am loved. I am held and adored. The heat of that love surrounds me like the sun, like hot water, like fire. But when I wake, I'm cold, ignored, alone."

My smile broadens when I see recognition flash across her features. I make a show of flipping the page, but don't break eye contact with her.

"In my dreams, I hunger. A terrible hunger that I thought could never be sated. Until him. Until he found me. He feeds that hunger and yet he makes it worse. Makes it harder to ignore. He makes me want to be bad. To break the chains that I've wrapped myself in."

"I want to be good. But, oh, I long to be bad. If anyone knew. If anyone suspected—"

"Stop!" She slams her hands to her desk and jumps to her feet.

“Ms. Gray, sit down.” The teacher’s words come from behind me, but I pay him no attention, staring straight at Arabella as I continue to read.

“If anyone suspects how much I need what he gives to me. How much his whispered words of praise heat my skin—”

Face flushed, she dashes to the front of the class and snatches the book, her diary, out of my hands.

“Where did you get this?” Her voice is sharp, but her eyes are wet and full of fear.

I shrug.

“I hate you!”

I laugh. “Not yet, you don’t. But you will, Princess. I promise you that.”

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CHAPTER 73

ARABELLA

“Hey, Arabella. Has Miles made you do anything bad lately?” Evan snickers across the breakfast table, wiggling his eyebrows. “Did he feed your hunger?”

Garrett laughs. “Did he give you something to suck on before he left to go home last night?”

Laughter erupts around us, rippling through the cafeteria.

Burying my face in my hands, the warmth from my cheeks scorches my palms. “Oh, my god. Please stop.”

It’s been a week since Eli read the passages out of my new diary. The depths of my humiliation have sunk into new and tortured levels. I still don’t know how he got it.

Eli Travers is more than a monster.

He’s turned into my waking nightmare.

Not only has he pawed through pages sacred to me, but he’s also seen a part of me that I’ve revealed to no one. My vulnerable side. My pain. The hopes and the darkness. I’m lucky it wasn’t my original diary. At least that’s safe back at the house. Still, this desecration of something important to me hurts.

All he’s been doing lately is going out of his way to torment me. First, reading my innermost thoughts out to the entire class and making me look like a psycho in front of Mr. Bellamy. Then stalking me across the campus the last few days and cornering me at every opportunity to sling barbs my way. Miles has been trying to direct his attacks, but he hasn’t helped by bragging that he’s the guy in my diary. All he’s done is fuel the other jocks into teasing me. He’s transformed from the perfect pretend boyfriend to the worst. I’m relieved he’s gone off-site to meet his boyfriend.

Maybe I should just tell him I don’t want to fake date anymore?

Lacy drops into the chair beside me, cutting my thoughts short. “What are you wearing for the Halloween party next Saturday?”

“I haven’t really given it much thought.” I lower my hands from my face.

She lifts her glass of juice, just to stop at her pink-coated lips. “Well, you need to decide.”

Homesickness is a sharp pain in my chest as I recall Halloween the year before. “Last year, me and Amanda cut holes out of white sheets and went trick or treating as ghosts.”

I haven’t heard from her in two weeks. I wonder what she’s doing. Maybe she’s forgotten me? What’s that saying? Out of sight, out of mind.

She’s moving on. What did I expect? That we’d be best friends forever like in all the movies we used to watch? That one day we’d live on the same street, and our kids would be friends just like we were. Maybe it’s time to let go of childish dreams. Holding onto them is only going to get my heart crushed, and I’m not sure how much of it I have left to spare.

Lacy gives a little laugh. “Cute, if you’re a dork.”

My smile fades at her reaction, and inadequacy squeezes my chest. “I can put something together out of my wardrobe.”

Lacy sighs. “You are not going to my party in sweats and a hoodie.”

“Technically, it’s the school’s party, cupcake,” Brad reminds her before taking a bite out of his piece of toast.

She rolls her eyes at her boyfriend and pouts. “Babe, I did all the work. That makes it mine.”

“I have to agree with Lacy, though. You need an outfit.” Jace speaks up from my right. “Everyone is going to have one. There’s a place in town that sells them.”

I fiddle with the four-leaf clover charm on my bracelet. “I don’t have a car.”

“That’s fine. We need to go into town. You can come with us.” Lacy fixes her gaze on me, her mouth curving in a bright smile. “At least I’ll be able to supervise what you buy.”

“Here. Try this on.” An arm appears around the changing room door clutching a white outfit.

I take it from Lacy’s hand and hold it up against myself. “Isn’t it a little short?”

“That’s the whole point.”

“Maybe I could try something a little longer.”

Lacy groans. “Do you want to go as a nun? Trust me, sexy suits you better.”

I turn my back to the mirror, strip down to my underwear and squeeze into the outfit. It clings to every curve. The layered mesh skirt of the white

thigh-high dress floats around me as I move. Tugging at the bust line, my breasts are practically spilling out, framed by the silver embroidery.

I chew on my lip, and inspect my reflection. "It shows too much cleavage."

"It's supposed to be like that," Lacy replies from the other side of the door.

"I'm not sure about this."

"You'll fit right in. Look, it even comes with a matching white thong!" Her hand appears again, this time holding a scrap of material and a pair of white wings.

I take them, leave the thong on the narrow bench, and carefully feed my arms through the elastic straps of the wings. The feathers are long and white, soft to the touch. Turning to the side, I admire them in the mirror.

"Don't leave us hanging, Arabella," Jace calls. "We want to see."

My stomach flutters with nerves. Counting to ten in my head, I grab onto my courage and open the door. Lacy, Brad, Evan, and Jace are all waiting for me on the other side.

Jace whistles. "Wow."

Brad flicks the end of one of my wings. "I like your wings. You make the perfect angel."

"She does, doesn't she?" Lacy's eyes crawl over me. "With that blonde hair and her pale complexion, she can't go as anything else."

"Miles is going to be one happy man when you're on your knees for him in that outfit." Evan grins. "I'd do you."

Doubt oozes in, leaving me feeling unsettled. "I should try something different."

"No, no, no." Jace insists, punching Evan in the arm. "Don't let this knucklehead put you off. You need to wear this."

Eyebrows knotting together, I glance down at myself. "You sure?"

Lacy grabs my shoulders and swirls me to face the changing room door. "We're getting it. Go get changed. We can grab lunch before we head back to the school."

I do as she says, struggling out of the dress and put my street clothes back on. Once I'm done, I leave the changing room. Jace is the only one outside when I emerge.

He plucks the angel outfit out of my hands.

"Hey!"

He winks, then sets off toward the counter. "I'm paying for it."

"What? No." I launch after him, trotting to keep up with his long strides. "I can use my stepdad's credit card."

"This is my treat."

"Why?"

He drops the outfit in front of the clerk, and hands the man his credit card. "What can I say? Seeing you in it took my breath away, and I can't let you back out of wearing it to the Halloween party."

"You didn't have to do that."

He takes the receipt from the clerk, adds it to the large white paper bag and hands it to me. "If you really want to repay me, you can do it with a kiss."

I clutch the handle tightly. "On the cheek."

"Of course." He leans in and turns his head, to offer me the side of his face. When I reach up to place a kiss on his cheek, He moves at the last second, and my mouth collides with his. My lips part in a startled gasp, and his tongue darts into my mouth.

I push him away. "Jace, I'm dating Miles."

"It's just a harmless kiss. Nothing more." His expression lights up playfully, eyes dancing with amusement. "Come on, we're headed to the cafe. Let's catch up to them."

CHAPTER 74

ELI

I go into the fancy dress store under protest. I have no interest in buying some cheap-ass ridiculous costume for the Halloween party. I'm not going to attend, so there is little point. But Kellan insists, and I follow him inside, muttering about stupid traditions beneath my breath.

He ignores me, digging through the various racks. I move away and pop my earbuds in, the sound of 'Bath Salts' by Highly Suspect filling my head and muffling the sounds of everyone else in the store.

I pull out my cell, my intention to order some art supplies when a flash of blonde hair catches my eye. Lifting my head, my attention is caught and held by Arabella as she comes out of the changing rooms.

The white concoction she's wearing hugs her curves like it's a second skin and leaves very little to the imagination. Or maybe that's simply because I *know* what it's hiding. Her legs are bare, the skirt barely covering her ass, and the top battling to keep her breasts contained.

Fuck me.

My dick springs to life and I whirl away, presenting the entire group with my back.

She looks like a whore.

My mind immediately denies that thought.

She looks fucking incredible.

Innocence wrapped up in temptation.

A walking lie.

A belief that's confirmed when I finally turn back to see her in a lip lock with Jace. She's clutching the bag and he has his credit card out.

Her boyfriend is nowhere in sight, so she's using her charms to get Jace to pay for her shit.

Figures.

She pushes him away with a light laugh and her lips move, saying something that makes him smile, and then they head toward the door. Her steps falter, and that bottom lip is caught between teeth in her signature move when she spots me.

My lip curls, but I let her go without comment. I have something much more effective in mind. Moving deeper into the store, I find what I'm looking for and take them to the clerk. She rings up my purchases with a smile and I've paid before Kellan finally decides on his outfit.

"All that for a pirate?" I arch an eyebrow.

"A murderous zombie pirate." He holds up extra props, then deposits the lot onto the counter. "What did you buy?"

"Not a costume."

"Did you see Arabella? Those fucking curves are mouthwatering. Did you drool? You did, didn't you?"

"No. She had her tongue stuck down Jace's throat while he paid for it."

"What? Really? Does Miles know?"

"Let me just check with my mind-reading skills." I tap the side of my head. "Nope ... nothing is coming through."

Back at school, Kellan insists on modeling his Halloween costume. I do a quick sketch of him standing on the prow of a ship while he poses.

"What happened to being a maid?" My pencil moves over the page in bold, confident strokes.

"I didn't want to upset all the girls by making their boyfriends question their sexuality. Didn't think it'd be fair on them."

I snort a laugh.

"Curfew is gonna hit soon. Did you want to go and grab something to eat?"

I toss the pencil and pad down. "I could eat."

Kellan strips out of his costume and pulls on jeans and a tee. I grab the bag with the things I purchased earlier, and we head downstairs. There's a low buzz of conversation when we enter the cafeteria. I automatically scan the room until I find blonde hair, and zero in on Arabella picking at a plate of nachos. Miles is beside her, chatting with Jace and Brad, who are opposite them.

"Get food. I just need to do something."

Kellan follows the line of my gaze and sighs. "What did you do?"

"You'll see." I walk toward their table and stop. The conversation slowly dies as they each notice me. I toss the bag to Miles. "I bought you something."

His brows dip and he looks at the bag in front of him. "For me?"

His moves are cautious as he reaches in. A look of confusion crosses his face when he pulls out a black leather collar and leash.

“It might help stop your bitch from straying when you’re not around.” I shift my attention to Jace. “Right?” The footballer flushes.

Miles looks at his friend, then at me. “What’s going on?”

“You should ask your girlfriend what flavor gum Jace likes. I’m pretty sure she has first-hand knowledge.”

“What? Did you kiss Jace, Bella? What the fuck?”

Chaos erupts as all the girls start questioning Arabella while Miles turns on Jace. I toss Arabella a smile.

“Game, set, and match,” I mouth and walk away.

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CHAPTER 75

ARABELLA

My gaze lingers on the trees covered in toilet paper, the long white strips flapping gently in the breeze like giant spider webs, as I walk across the campus, while Lacy chatters beside me.

“The caterer has agreed to make these amazing artisan cakes. They are costing a fortune, but they are just perfect for the party.”

“Is the school really paying for all this?” I cast a dubious look in her direction. “Linda told me you have a 3D projection mapped out with ghosts and bats. Hollywood-style special effects like smoking cauldrons and dry ice—”

She flaps her hand at me. “Of course, they will.”

Entering the main building, we stroll toward our lockers through the throng of other students. I scan the sea of faces, praying Eli isn’t among them.

“Don’t you think it might be a little too much?”

Lacy rolls her eyes. “Trust me, it’s going to be way more impressive than the dollar store decorations your last school provided for your festivities.”

A roar splits the air to the left. Twisting around, I’m in time to see a masked figure dressed in black lunging toward us. I jump, my heart thrashing so hard in my chest that I’m surprised it doesn’t burst.

The figure halts in front of us, and laughs. When they peel off the mask, it reveals a familiar face. “Got you.”

“What the hell, Brad?” Lacy screeches.

The grin on his mouth falters. “Cupcake—”

She holds up her hand. “Don’t talk to me.”

“But—”

She marches along the hallway, dragging me along with her, away from her boyfriend. “Ugh, I’m sick of all the pranks.”

I look behind me and catch a glimpse of his crestfallen face. “I thought you liked Halloween?”

“I like the dressing up and partying bit. Not the rest.”

“We’ve got a few more days until Saturday.”

“It can’t come quick enough.” She shakes her head. “How are you and Miles doing after what happened?”

“We’re on a mini break.”

Miles wasn’t happy to learn that Jace had tricked me into kissing him. The naked betrayal in his expression when Eli told him what happened had made me sick to my stomach. It took him a lot to convince me afterward that he was just acting.

Eli might have let it drop, but I don’t think it had the effect he was hoping for. Miles and I have been texting back and forth since the incident in the cafeteria. He’s playing the upset boyfriend, while I’ve taken the role of repentant girlfriend. Whatever game Eli is playing, he hasn’t won. If anything, it’s made my friend more protective of me.

My phone buzzes in my bag, I fish it out.

Miles: Eli is already in class.

The warning gives me a tiny splinter of relief. We’ve been using this system to keep me away from Eli for the last few days. Miles watches for him and tells me where not to go.

Me: Thanks. I’m at my locker with Lacy.

Miles: Watch out for Jace.

Me: Don’t worry, I’m steering clear of him.

Miles: Good girl.

I smile at the praise, pleasure spreading through my chest. Not as intense as when my darer said it to me, but there. My thoughts swim toward the stranger who captured my attention.

Is he still watching me?

My pulse picks up, like a steady drum beneath my skin, but I push the question down.

Tina and Linda meet us as we reach the door to the classroom.

“Is it true?” Tina’s eyes are wide as she positions herself in front of Lacy. “Are you doing a ghost walk for Saturday?”

Lacy nods excitedly. “Duh! With all the dead people in the cemetery, it would be stupid not to. Mr. Bellamy is going to dress up and be like a tour guide. He knows a bunch of stuff about the old owner of this place. It’s going to be super spooky.”

“You should get some people to jump out while he’s talking,” Linda suggests.

My roommate hums. “Maybe we could hire someone to do it.”

“Do we have anything left in the budget?” Tina frowns. “We were running close to the cut-off in the last meeting.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Eli scowling at me from his corner. Kellan is at the desk beside him, leaning off his chair to whisper in his friend’s ear. I can feel my stepbrother’s hate between us, like it’s a living, breathing thing.

He’s trying to intimidate me and I’m letting him do it. Why am I so weak?

The thought echoes through my being and straight into the empty black hole inside me. I hide my pain. I’ve done it for so long that it’s become second nature. Almost the same as breathing at this point.

I paste on a smile and pour all my focus into the conversation the cheerleaders are having.

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CHAPTER 76

ELI

I stand when Arabella and her friends walk into the room and take a casual walk over to the other side, where there's a stack of supplies—spare writing books, pens, and calculators. I pick up a calculator and turn. My timing is impeccable. I reach Arabella's desk just as she slips between it and her chair and starts to lower herself. Whistling under my breath, I swing out a foot and kick the chair away. She crashes to the ground on her ass in front of me. The class erupts into laughter. I hook my thumbs into the belt loops of my jeans and stare down at her.

When her eyes lift to meet mine, her face is burning. I hike an eyebrow.

"I know you like being on your back, Princess, but at least wait until class is over." I skirt around her and return to my seat.

"I can hear you all the way down the hallway." Mr. Drake walks into the room. "Arabella, why are you sitting on the floor?" He waves a hand. "No, don't answer that. I don't want to know what you crazy lot get up to when I'm not here. Open your textbooks to page one fifty-two and let's get started."

The class quiets down as everyone bends their heads and focuses on the work. As always, it feels like the math class lasts a lifetime, and I'm glad when it's finally over. Art is next, but we're not working on our project pieces. We're in the art studio making things for the Halloween party. I know where I'd rather be, but I stash my math book into my bag and head out of the room. Kellan has computer science, so we agree to meet up for lunch and go our separate ways.

I pull out the second cell and fire it up. She still hasn't read any of the messages I've left.

Me: Guess you're not done sulking yet. You know where I am when you remember what you really want.

I turn it off and almost crash into the girl herself when I walk into the studio. A quick sideways step and I narrowly avoid sending her across the room. It's tempting, but I've made it a personal rule not to fuck with her in art. It's the one class I do not want to fail, and McIntyre won't hesitate to throw me out if he sees me causing trouble.

I set up the final piece of the mural in a corner of the room and select the paints I need. Movement to my left turns my head to see Arabella setting up an easel nearby. She catches me looking at her and spins away, but not before her cheeks grow red under my gaze.

With one hand, I pull my earbuds out of a pocket and push them into my ears, then dip my hand back in to bring out my cell and queue up the music. A second later, 'I Don't Like The Drugs' by Marilyn Manson is playing.

Setting aside all thoughts of Arabella, I focus on the painting in front of me. I need to finish the skyline and add some spectral figures between the gravestones and then it's complete. I'll gain marks for supplying something to the party, as well as points for appearing to be sociable for once—something the school is always trying to make me do. Hopefully, it'll be enough to make them leave me alone until Christmas, when the idiocy will repeat itself.

I wake up with a start, heart racing and my harsh breathing loud in my ears. It's dark and, other than my strangled breaths, silent. I push up and swing my legs off the side of the bed, my intention to go into the bathroom until I've calmed down.

"You okay?" Kellan's voice stops me when I'm halfway across the room.

"Yeah." My voice is rough and raspy, as though I've been shouting.

"Sure?" The light above his bed clicks on, and he sits up. "You were yelling."

I sigh and turn back to face him. "It's almost Halloween."

His tongue snakes out to wet his lips and he nods. "I know." His voice is quiet.

"Why is school acting like it's just another party?"

"Because they want to move past what happened last year. You can't blame them for that."

"Fucking Lacy should know better."

"I think they all just want to make a better memory, Eli." His voice is sad. "God knows, we need one."

I sigh, my heart rate slowing down. "I'm going to drive out to see her tomorrow. Take some flowers."

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to."

“She was my friend, too.” He switches off the light and settles back down. “Get some sleep.”

I uncap the bottle of tequila while Kellan brushes away the leaves covering the small plot in front of the gravestone. I take a mouthful, then pour some onto the ground before handing it to my friend.

“Happy birthday, Zoey,” I say quietly.

Kellan sits down and hooks his hands around his knees. “Do you think her parents ever come?” He arranges a vase of flowers—all her favorite colors—and sets it in front of the stone.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I guess someone does as it’s kept clean.”

“My gran would set up camp at my grave if I was dead.”

“That’s because you’re a spoiled brat.” I take the bottle back and swallow another mouthful.

“I can’t help being so damn adorable.” He holds out a hand for the bottle, spills some more onto the grave, and then lifts it to his lips. “I was her favorite.”

I snort. “No, you weren’t.”

The smile he directs at me is gentle. “No, I wasn’t. Zoey had no favorite. She loved us both.”

Silence falls between us as we pass the bottle back and forth, sharing it with Zoey, until it’s empty. I stand and stagger to the gravestone, stroking my fingers over the words etched into the marble.

“Sometimes I wonder if you died because we were friends. If you’d stayed away from me, would you still be alive?”

“It’s not your fault, Eli.”

“I’m not so sure.” I turn to face him, draping an arm across the top of the stone, hugging it like I used to hug her. “She was popular. Everyone loved her ... right up until the moment she chose to be friends with me.”

“With us.”

“She was already friendly with you. It wasn’t until she forced her friendship on me that everyone started to avoid her. That’s when the pranks started, the name calling, the dares.”

Kellan lays back, tucking his hands behind his head and closes his eyes. “She chose to do the dares, Eli. No one made her do them. We don’t know why she went to the cemetery that night.”

“Don’t we?” I could make a good guess. The dares had excited her, made her feel alive she said, when her parents forgot she existed. Someone had fed into that, enticed her to play.

Like you’re doing with Arabella.

I squashed the whisper in my head. It’s not the same. I didn’t want to kill Arabella, just ... touch her, taste her, hear her moan.

I groan and sink to my knees so I can rest my head against the cool marble. Somewhere along the way I’ve forgotten why I started this shit. I can’t get rid of the thought that she’s not the person I’ve painted her to be, that she’s not her mother. But then she goes and does something that makes me question what I’m seeing, what I’m feeling.

Like that fucking outfit she bought. That *Jace* bought, I correct myself. She could have paid for it herself, but she didn’t. She let him do it, and then kissed him.

“Why are you growling?” Kellan’s words splinter the silence, and I roll my head sideways to peer at him.

“What?”

“You’re growling. It’s interesting. I’ve never heard you make that noise before.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m not the one making weird noises.”

I shake my head and push to my feet. “Ready to go back?”

“Can you drive?”

“Zoey had most of the bottle. I’m good.” I stroke over the stone once more. “Miss you, ZoZo. Hope you’re having a party up there.” I stoop and press a kiss to the cold marble. Kellan repeats the action on the opposite side.

“Love you, Zoobles,” he whispers.

It’s hard to walk away, to leave her there. It’s like someone is squeezing my heart in a vice-like grip. It aches, hurts. I close my eyes and suck in a breath, then lift my lids.

“Okay, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

CHAPTER 77

ARABELLA

Tugging down the skirt of my angel outfit, I send an anxious glance toward my roommate. “Did you really have to put me in pigtails?”

“It goes with the whole innocent look,” Lacy assures me, still checking her makeup in the small compact mirror in her hand. The bodice of her red dress plunges low between her breasts, and the skirt is so high it should be illegal. It’s taken her all day to get ready, from taking a leisurely bath to doing her hair and perfect makeup.

“You’re just nervous. This is the party of the year. The next one isn’t until Christmas ... if we have one. Once we get there, you’ll relax.” Snapping the mirror shut, she gives me a smile, showing off her pretend fangs. “And don’t chew your lip, or you’ll smudge your lipstick.”

I resist the urge to sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “I just think it’s a little too much.”

“I let you wear ballet flats instead of the white heels I was going to let you borrow,” she reminds me. “You got your own way with that.”

And she’d only conceded on those because I couldn’t walk in them. I don’t wear heels. The one time I tried on a pair of Elena’s, I twisted my ankle.

Lacy moves toward the door. “Brad and the others should be waiting for us by now. We can make our fashionable entrance.”

I retrieve the little bag that matches my outfit, and trail after her. A few other students are hurrying out of their rooms, ready to party.

I tug at my skirt again and try not to think about how much thigh it’s showing.

Why did I ever let her talk me into getting this costume?

“Stop fidgeting,” Lacy scolds as we exit the building. “You need to start owning who you are.”

Cool air rushes over me in a ripple of goosebumps. “I’m not used to wearing something like this. It shows way more than the cheerleading uniform, and I’ve never worn a thong before.”

She turns to face me. “Shoulders straight, chin up. I don’t want to see you touching your skirt or bustline. Stop whining, and do *not* let me down this

evening. Do you understand?”

I nod, the steel in her tone silencing any further arguments I have.

Lacy’s eyes soften. “This is a really important night for me. I need it to be perfect.”

The rest of the journey to the ballroom is conducted in silence while doubts assail me.

Was coming to this party a good idea?

I’m not a party girl. I’d rather be somewhere quiet with a handful of people.

I feel out of my depth.

The front of the ballroom is lit up purple and green, the lighting giving it an eerie effect. 3D projections of ghosts fly across the top of the building with hair-raising cackles. We’re greeted by a red carpet, with ghouls lined up on either side. A stream of students is already heading into the party dressed in spooky costumes—ranging from zombies to witches.

Lacy squeals beside me. “It’s better than I imagined!”

A few people glance our way, and it’s hard to miss the way some of the guys’ eyes linger over what I’m wearing. I curl my hands into fists and keep them at my sides. Lacy grabs my arm, drags me through the doors.

Smoke hangs in the air like a veil, blurring the view of the colored lights. People are clustered in groups, mostly in their normal cliques. Brad is dressed as Frankenstein’s monster and is standing with the other jocks, close to one of the long tables holding drinks. As we make our way toward them, I notice Miles is absent.

Brad plants a kiss on Lacy’s cheek. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks, babe.” She strikes a pose, then laughs.

“Where’s Miles?” I ask Evan, who is dressed as an Egyptian mummy.

He shrugs. “He was here ten minutes ago.”

I pull out my cell and type a quick message.

Me: I’m with Brad and the others.

At least I don’t have to worry about Eli. He hasn’t been spotted since this morning when Bret from the swim team saw him take off in his car.

“Arabella, why are you so quiet?”

My attention flicks to Jace. “I’m fine.”

His hair is slicked back from his face, and the black eye makeup he’s wearing makes his eyes more striking.

“If it’s about you and Miles, there’s plenty more boys to date.” He gives me a flirty smirk, his fangs peeking from his lips.

“Miles and I are working things out.”

I’m on to you, Jace Black, and I’m not falling for your tricks a second time.

Lacy pushes past us, her fingers wound around her boyfriend’s bicep. “Why haven’t they started the music yet? Do I have to do everything myself?”

The rest of the group moves to the side of the room, and I follow in their wake. There’s still no sign of Miles, but I do see Kellan over by the punch bowl.

Warm fingers grip my hand, breaking my stare. Tilting my head, I see Miles standing next to me. He’s dressed up as Superman, with a big, bold S on his chest.

“Hey. Sorry. I got chatting with Sam and his roommate.” His gaze runs over me. “How can you look sweet and innocent, but temptation itself all at the same time?”

“Aw, thank you.” I pat his chest playfully, letting my fingertips caress the S.

Jace scowls.

Miles wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into the warmth of his side. “My girlfriend is the sexiest girl here.”

“You two are back together then?” Evan chuckles.

I rest my head against Miles’ chest and hug him tightly. “We’re soul mates. Nothing was going to keep us apart for long.”

“I’m going to get a drink.” Jace edges around us and storms off toward the other side of the hall, with Evan behind him.

Miles leans down to whisper in my ear. “Did he try anything?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure he was going to.”

“Don’t drink the punch.”

I meet his gaze at the warning. “Why?”

He flashes me his perfect white teeth in a boyish smile. “I think Kellan just spiked it.”

“Should we tell someone?”

“No. Security will figure it out soon enough, when people start staggering around. After last year, we all need something to distract us.”

The sadness in his tone piques my curiosity. “What happened last year?”

Miles' gaze drops from mine. "Zoey died."

My mouth falls open in shock. "Wait! That was on Halloween?"

"Yeah."

"Lacy never mentioned anything."

"I think this party is Lacy's way of trying to forget what happened."

"I thought they were friends?" I can't see her or Brad through the growing crowd.

"Everyone copes differently with bad memories." Miles' grip on my waist tightens for a heartbeat before it loosens. "Maybe this is just her way of dealing with it all."

Music erupts into life, ending any further conversation. Couples swarm eagerly into the center of the hall, bodies moving to the beat. Grabbing my hand, Miles drags me to join them. My dance moves are uncoordinated and stiff. He doesn't seem to mind and pretty soon I'm laughing at some of his own chaotic and messy movements. I'm breathless and feel more confident by the time we leave the dance floor.

"Stay right here. I need to use the restroom." Miles drops a kiss on my cheek. "I'll be right back."

He pushes his way through the packed ballroom, and past the security guards, who are prowling around, splitting up anyone making out.

The music changes to something with a faster beat. It thrums straight through my body and into my eardrums.

Minutes tick by, and Miles doesn't return. Worried, I send him a text.

Me: Hey, where are you?

I scan the crowd. Lacy and Brad are dancing, surrounded by a few of the other jocks, but there's no sign of Miles.

I check my messages, my concern notching up a level when I still have no response after ten minutes.

Me: Are you ok?

The air is hot and sticky in the packed space, and my earlier uneasiness returns, growing stronger by the second.

I can't breathe.

A sense of claustrophobia cocoons me.

I need air.

The onset of a panic attack is quick and unexpected. I rush through the bodies filling the hall, aiming for the exit.

I burst out through the main door, and gulp in a lung full of fresh air. I can't shake the feeling of being caged in. Feet moving, I don't stop until I'm halfway across the campus.

My heart slows, but the lingering tendrils of agitation continue to cling to me.

I need to clear my head.

The candlelight of the jack-o-lanterns marking the entrance to the ghost walk through the cemetery beckons to me. It's not supposed to start for another hour. I make my way toward the trees and come to a stop where their light bathes everything around them in a golden hue.

I haven't been back in the woods since my accident. Wrapping my arms around my waist, I stare along the lit trail, the lanterns making a path on either side.

I take a slow step forward. Then another, and another, until I'm walking through the trees. I'm shrouded in apprehension, but there's a strange sense of comfort being here. It's quiet. Somewhere I can leave the world behind, and my life isn't the mess it's turned into.

When I reach the familiar bench, I stop and glance toward the cemetery entrance.

This is where Zoey died.

Coming out here to do the dares.

What was she like? Had she been scared out here in the dark? What really happened to her?

My heart aches for the girl who lost her life among the graves.

Had she really fitted in? Will anyone ever know what happened to her?

The hairs on the back of my neck tingle in a warning. I shift from foot to foot, and dart a look back along the lit path.

"Who's there? Miles?"

Silence.

Uneasiness creeps through me. "If that's you, Jace, this isn't funny."

I wait for a second or two, but no one comes forward, and I don't hear anything else. But my comfort has been shattered, so I turn and make my way back toward the school.

CHAPTER 78

ELI

The morning of Halloween is crisp and cool, but dry. I haven't been sleeping well since visiting Zoey's grave, and I skip breakfast in favor of staying in bed. I don't want to be around people. I feel off, on edge. Like I'm waiting for something to happen.

Kellan, on the other hand, is hyper as fuck. I know it's his way of dealing with today. There is no way he is going to be anything other than over the top. But I'm not ready to deal with that yet. I need to sort out my head first; otherwise, we might have another murder, and this year it really will be blood on my hands.

I finally drag my ass out of bed when my nine-thirty alarm goes off, take a quick shower, dress, and grab my car keys. I'll take a drive, try and clear my head and avoid all the fucking craziness that's happening on the campus today.

The hallway outside my room is full of people. Some are already dressed up and running around, making ridiculous noises, or shuffling like zombies. I pull my hood up, turn up the music in my ears and tune them all out as I walk through.

Thankfully, no one tries to stop me, and I make it out of the building in record time. I head straight to my car, toss my earbuds and cell phone onto the passenger seat, and start the engine.

I tear down the road and through the gates, window down and 'XanaX' by Badflower blaring from the stereo. I know people see me because there's a cluster of students near the gates. I think I spot some of the jocks mixed in, but I don't pay close enough attention to know for sure.

I have no end destination in mind, but the simple monotony of driving along the road and taking random turns does the trick and my body and mind slowly starts to relax. When I reach Cape May, I park the car and climb out, sucking in a breath of sea air.

My mom loved the sea, and whenever I was feeling overwhelmed or upset as a kid, it was where she would bring me. Not *this* particular beach, but the location doesn't matter. The smells and sounds are enough. I don't

even know why I'm so wound up today, but my nerves feel raw. I'm sure part of it is due to Zoey and what happened to her a year ago.

Toeing off my sneakers, I pick them up and walk across the sand, letting the breeze and sound of the seagulls soothe my nerves. By the time I return to the car, I'm feeling better, more relaxed, less tense. I lean against the side of my car to dust off the sand from my feet before lacing up my sneakers, then grab a bite to eat from one of the beachside cafes. I opt to sit at one of the tables outside to sip my coffee and eat the cream cheese and ham bagel. My cell vibrates against my leg. I consider ignoring it, but it's probably Kellan so I pull it out.

Sure enough, it's my best friend. I laugh quietly into my mug. My *only* friend.

Kellan: Where did you go?

Me: Took a drive to clear my head. Will be back in an hour, give or take.

Kellan. An hour? Where are you?

Me: Cape May.

Kellan: The beach. Should have known. Bring some alcohol back with you.

Me: Preference?

Kellan: Something that won't change the color of the punch.

He ends the text with a wink emoji.

It's late afternoon when I finally get back to Churchill Bradley. People are milling around, and I have a couple of near misses when they don't get off the drive leading to the parking lot fast enough. Okay, so maybe I put my foot on the gas a time or two. I wouldn't be sad to introduce half of them to the front of my car.

I'm climbing out of the car and reaching for the bags of alcohol when a hand clutches my sleeve.

"Where have you *been*? I need you to put the mural in place!" Lacy's tone is sharp with annoyance.

I turn slowly, my eyes on her fingers where it rests on my arm.

"A, get your hand off me. B, touch me again without permission and I'll break your fingers. And C, get one of your minions to do it."

"For god's sake, Eli, can't we just have one day where you don't act like a fucking monster."

Monster. I mask a flinch at the word. How many times have I been called that over the years? I should be used to it by now. And, for the most part, I am. But on days like today, when I'm already feeling raw, it hits harder than it should.

I summon up a smile. "It's Halloween, Lacy. Why would I pretend to be something I'm not when it's the one day of the year being the monster is popular?"

Her fingers drop and she pouts. I fight not to roll my eyes.

"Please, Eli? Pretty please?" She touches a finger to her lips. "I did what you wanted, like a good girl." Her body moves closer to mine, breasts pressing against my arm. "I could be a good girl for you again." Her voice drops to a whisper.

"I'm good, thanks." I grab the bags off the back seat, then lock the car. "I'll take these up to my room, then bring the mural down for you."

She squeals and throws her arms around my neck, covering my cheek in kisses. I'm about to shove her off me when I see movement and look around to find Jace glaring at us. I toss him a smile and hold his gaze while I bring my hands down to cover Lacy's ass and squeeze, pulling her against me.

I know he'll go straight to Brad with what he's seen. And sure enough, he scowls and spins to go back the way he came. I pat Lacy's ass and push her away.

"If you don't let me go, you won't get your mural."

"Are you sure I can't ..." Her eyes drop to my groin.

"We've done this already. Go and find your boyfriend to get you off." I walk around her without waiting to see if she has anything else to say.

Kellan isn't in our room when I get there, so I dump the bottles on his bed, then go and move the mural pieces as promised. The ballroom has been decorated to look like the interior of a haunted house. The centerpieces of each table are little coffins with hands bursting out of them. They're cute, I guess. It takes three trips to bring down everything, and I position it against the wall Lacy decided on when I first started the job. Once it's in place, I step back to give it one final look over.

"Looks great," Kellan says from behind me.

I nod without looking at him. "I put some little Easter eggs on it. See if you can find them. Did you get the drinks?"

“Yeah, I’ve stashed them in the restroom for later, when people are distracted.” He moves to stand beside me. “Still not coming tonight?”

I’m shaking my head before he’s finished asking. “I have to spend all day with these people. Why the fuck would I choose to spend my free time with them? I’ll work on my sculpture, then head back to our room. I’m not in the mood to party.”

He pats my shoulder. He knows why I don’t want to party, just like I know why he does. It’s both our ways of dealing with what happened a year ago. I take a step back.

“Okay, I’m out of here.”

I spend the evening locked away with my art project. I can hear the music from the party, the laughter and shrieks as people scare each other. I’m not remotely tempted to join them. The off feeling from earlier has returned, and I can’t even escape for a drive. The main gates are locked, and students aren’t allowed off the grounds once the sun has set. But I’m finding it hard to concentrate, and I don’t want to fuck up and ruin the marble piece I’m working on, so I snatch up my hoodie, a bottle of vodka, and step outside.

I’ll take a walk. The woods should still be quiet, aside from the main path that’s been laid out. If I stick to the shadows, I should be left alone.

CHAPTER 79

ARABELLA

I backtrack along the path toward the school, but the sound of a twig snapping up ahead stops me. My breath hitches in my throat. Cautiously I study the darkness beyond the lights of jack-o'-lanterns watching for any signs of movement.

It's just someone trying to spook me. I shouldn't have come up here alone.

A long, sharp whistle sounds to my left.

I turn on my heels, and sprint back through the woods toward the bench. The path loops the cemetery before going back toward the school. If I keep ahead, I can outrun them.

What if they aren't alone?

The thought of someone else waiting for me on the other side has dread expanding through me. When the bench comes into view, I veer off and rush through the arched gates of the cemetery. Breathing ragged, I weave my way through the gravestones, but when I reach the tomb, it's padlocked.

Fuck.

I duck down behind one of the nearest headstones. Lanterns have been dotted throughout the hallowed site, giving the whole area a mysterious, eerie glow.

My hands shake as I screw my eyes closed and will my breathing to steady.

Did they see me? Maybe it's just Jace and Evan trying to freak me out?

What if it's my darer? He said he was going to punish me for not responding. No, he would have left a message in my locker since I'm not looking at the texts.

Footsteps pound along the ground, slowing down as they reach the gate.

"Did you see her?" A voice I recognize asks. Garrett, one of the jocks I don't know so well.

"No." A second one replies.

"Shit."

"Maybe she cut through the trees?"

"Damn it," Garrett growls. "I wanted to see what she was wearing under that skirt. She's been asking for it all evening in that tight little dress. Miles

is one lucky bastard, but five minutes with me, and she'd drop him in a heartbeat."

The second voice laughs. "I think she's hot for Jace. At least that's what I heard."

A spark of recognition unfurls.

Kevin from the swim team?

Hugging my knees, I bite the inside of my cheek so hard it hurts.

"You're drunk. The ghost walk will be starting soon," Kevin tells his friend. "We should head back."

"Yeah, you're right." Garrett sounds disappointed.

Adrenaline rocks through me but not in a good way. It leaves me feeling sick and trembling.

Why did I ever come out here?

As their footsteps move away, I remain in hiding. Silence returns, but I'm too scared to move.

Attention shifting, my gaze lands on a metal plaque that's been fixed on a short column of stone beside one of the headstones. Inching toward it on my hands and knees, I keep low.

When I'm closer, there's enough light from one of the lanterns near it to make out a name.

Zoey Rivers.

The girl who had died.

This must be where it happened.

"Hi, Zoey." My voice comes out in a whisper. "I hope you don't mind my company for a little while."

The wind rustles through the trees in answer.

I take that as a good sign, sit back on my haunches and study the carved name. "My name is Arabella."

Sagging down, I hug my knees to my chest again, and rest my chin on top of them. "I'm Lacy's new roommate. I don't know much about you."

I can hear the faint music from the Halloween party, but I continue to sit there, soaking up the soothing quiet.

"Were you one of the popular girls? You must have been if you were friends with Lacy. Did you ever feel like a round peg trying to fit into a square hole? That's my world right now. I'm not sure where I belong."

CHAPTER 80

ELI

I'm sitting on one of the graves when she runs into the cemetery. She doesn't see me as she darts past and down the steps to the tomb. I don't say a word when she pulls on the doors and finds them locked, then spins to duck behind one of the graves. I take another pull of vodka from the bottle and slip off the stone. My intention is to tell her to fuck off, but then voices reach me out of the darkness laughing about cornering her.

She lowers her head, pressing it against her knees. She's clearly hiding from them. The thought of letting them know she's there flits through my mind, but I dismiss it. There are many things I'll do, many depths I'll lower myself to, but I won't put a girl in a situation where she loses the option of saying no. I might be a monster, I might hate the fucking sight of her, but I still have my limits.

When they leave, their voices grow fainter until silence returns, she shifts onto her hands and knees. My eyes roam over her. The dress barely hides anything and the position she's in rides the skirt up over her ass, displaying the thong she's wearing. My dick hardens, and I wet my lips with my tongue. I should get out of here before she sees me and accuses me of looking at her. She'd be right. I *am* looking at her, but that isn't the point. I was here first. She just didn't see me. But I don't move toward the gates. My feet take me closer to her, because she's whispering, and I want to know what she's saying.

She changes position, sitting with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. I stop behind her, and prop one shoulder against the gravestone beside me.

Something sharp twists my stomach when she introduces herself to Zoey, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to grab her shoulder and force her away from the girl I'd tried to protect and failed. Instead, I take another mouthful of vodka and just watch her.

"Were you one of the popular girls? You must have been if you were friends with Lacy. Did you ever feel like a round peg trying to fit into a square hole? That's my world right now. I'm not sure where I belong."

She sounds sad, defeated, and a small stab of guilt runs through me. I tense and push it away. I've done what I have to do. She doesn't deserve my guilt, my concern. She's here because she conspired with her mother to bag a rich husband.

So why am I stepping forward, and crouching beside her, bottle held in loose fingers between my thighs.

"She *was* popular." My voice makes her jump. "Until she wasn't." I lift the bottle and offer it to her. She shakes her head.

"What happened to her?" Her voice is hesitant. I can make a good guess why. She's waiting for me to attack.

"She got a dare." I give a careless shrug.

The vodka has numbed my feelings. I'm not sober enough to be upset or angry, and I'm too drunk to hate her.

"She fell in with the wrong crowd. She trusted the wrong person. It killed her." I punctuate each sentence with a drink from the bottle. "She's not buried here though. This ..." I flick a finger toward the plaque. "This is just to remember her. An X marks the spot kind of thing."

"X marks the spot?" She turns to frown at me.

"This is where she was found. There's probably still a chunk missing out of the gravestone you're leaning on. They say she hit her head on it."

She twists around, up on her knees to peer at the stone behind her. The move causes her dress to ride up, revealing creamy thighs and my mind immediately builds a picture of her splayed out on the coffin inside the tomb, naked, wet, hot, and desperate.

Fuck.

"Why the fuck are you here, anyway?" I harden my tone, fighting against the urge to bury my face into the curve of her throat. Those fucking pigtailed are messing with my head. I want to wrap my hand around them and pull her head back, so I can arch her neck and sink my teeth into it.

She darts a quick glance at me. "Someone was following me."

"Not fucking surprised dressed like that." I wave the bottle toward her. "You might as well have written *fuck me* across your forehead." I take another swig of vodka. "Or was that the plan? Luring Jace out here so he can get his money's worth?"

Her fingers curl into fists and she jumps to her feet. "I'm not interested in Jace, and I don't want anyone's money. You don't even know me, Eli, yet

you judge me, and make my life a misery. Does that make you feel good knowing what you do to me?"

I smirk. "What do I do to you, Princess?"

"You like hurting me. You're a *bully*, Eli Travers. You think you're better than me because you're rich."

That makes me laugh. "I'm better than you because I'm *real* and you're a fucking Barbie doll that just mirrors whatever you think people want to see." I wave a hand at the dress she's wearing and rise to my feet. "Or is that dress *really* you?"

Arabella's gaze drops from mine. "Lacy suggested it ... I ... it's not what I would have chosen."

My laugh is derisive. "But you have to keep the money flowing, right? Can't be the real you in case it doesn't fit with what the rich people want." I pause for another mouthful of vodka; nothing comes out of the bottle and I squint down at it.

Letting it drop to the ground, I take a step forward. "But here's the thing, *Princess*. I've read your diary. I've seen the real you. And all this bullshit?" I wave my hand from her head to her toes and back again. "You're just fucking pretending."

"I hate you. I hate you so much for what you did."

"What *I* did? What the fuck did I do? *You're* the one who keeps leeching off my father."

Anger flashes in her eyes. "I don't want your father's stupid money. All I wanted was to stay in my home, but Elena destroyed that. Why can't you see that I had nothing to do with them getting married? I didn't even know until you turned up at the house."

"Oh, boo fucking hoo. You had to leave your miserable house of squalor to live in a mansion and go to a private school. I can see how that must be so fucking tough for you." I advance toward her a step, and she moves backward. "I don't believe you had no idea. You were fucking baking welcome-home pastries. Did you think I didn't notice that you'd purposely baked my father's favorites?"

Arabella's mouth gapes open. "They were for my fucking neighbor, and I would rather live in a house of squalor than be anywhere near a coward like you."

"Coward?" I repeat the word softly. "Now, how have I managed to give you the impression that I'm a coward, I wonder?" Another step takes me

closer and yet again she stumbles backward. “Was it me standing at the front of the class and reading your diary? Or maybe it was giving Miles a leash to keep his little bitch on? Or wait ... was it playing with a knife at lunch?”

She’s trembling, but she still raises her chin defiantly. “You’re a coward because you prey on someone you see as weaker than you. It’s pathetic.”

“It *is* pathetic how weak you are; I agree.” Another step brings us to the end of the cemetery, and there’s a thud as her back hits the wall.

I smile. She pales.

“Anyone who had any backbone at all wouldn’t have bought a way into a school they have no business being in.” I slap my hands either side of her head. “I don’t even know why you’re here when all you have to do is follow in your mother’s footsteps and open your legs for the richest bidder. Who needs education when you can just fuck your way through life?”

Heat radiates out from my cheek, and my head snaps sideways from the force of her slap. I bring my head back around to face her and laugh.

“What the fuck was that?”

In answer she shoves at me, her hands flat against my chest. I don’t move. She shoves again. I step closer, reducing the distance between us. Her scent, some subtle aroma and *not* the floral one I remember, hits my nose, and I lick my lips. Her arms lock, hands still firm against my chest, in an attempt to stop me crowding closer, but I’m stronger than she is and we’re nose to nose before she can slip away.

“Hit me again.” My demand is rough. She doesn’t need asking twice, and her palm connects with my cheek a second time. “At least do it like you mean it.”

Her eyes narrow, and her lips part. She’s going to scream. I can see it in her eyes. So, I do the only thing I can to stop her.

I kiss her.

CHAPTER 81

ARABELLA

“Hit me again.” Eli’s voice is low and rough.

White hot anger blinds me, and my hand slaps hard across his cheek again, leaving my palm stinging.

“At least do it like you mean it.” His eyes turn feral.

He’s going to hurt me.

Drawing in a breath to scream, the air locks in my lungs when Eli’s mouth smashes down onto mine. There’s nothing soft about the branding contact. I feel the cool metal of his lip ring as he parts my lips, his tongue darting inside. I’m paralyzed, my limbs refusing to move and my mind blanks.

It feels wrong to have him touching me, but the needy part of me dissolves into the hot and hard kiss. Sensation takes over, and my eyes close. I wrap my arms around his neck, and moan into the kiss. He groans back, the sound vibrating across my tongue. My knees give out, and I melt against him.

His mouth becomes hungry, punishing, our lips clashing in a silent frantic battle. One second, we’re flush up against each other, and in the next, I’m free.

Panting and dazed, I use the wall for support. My brain is unable to process what the hell just happened. I’ve never been kissed like that before.

“What did you do that for?” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and try to get rid of the taste of his lips from mine.

Eli is glaring at me with murderous green eyes. “Nice try. What was the plan? To seduce me. That won’t work, *Princess*. You’ve got nothing that I want.”

“*You* kissed me!”

His lips curl up in a sneer. “You were begging for it.”

The flicker of anger from before reignites, and I curl my fingers into fists. I want to hit him harder, pummel him into the dirt. I want to claw out his eyes until he’s raw and bleeding.

“I hate you, Eli Travers.” I clench my jaw to stop myself from saying anything further.

“The feeling is mutual.” His attention latches onto my hands. “Hit me again, and you’ll get worse next time.”

“Go to hell.” I rush away from him and out of the cemetery.

I can still feel his kiss. I can taste him on my tongue.

Did he do it to humiliate me again?

I keep running until I’m past the tree line and across the grass. My vision is blurry with tears, but they’re from rage and not fear. I don’t even register the few students I pass. My feet keep me moving until I’m at the door of my room.

I throw open the door and slam it shut after me.

I can still feel Eli’s mouth, his tongue. I scrub my hand over my lips, but nothing I do removes the memory. Throwing myself down on the bed, an onslaught of angry tears pour down my cheeks, and I scream into the pillow.

I hope he rots in hell.

I’m sick of his crap. Sick of the attacks.

You only hate him more because he made you feel something.

The voice in my head has me punching my pillow.

For one brief moment, Eli Travers made me forget everything. I’d been lost in the pleasure of a kiss that should never have happened.

CHAPTER 82

ELI

What the fuck was that?

I don't move from where she's left me, staring after her figure as she dashes through the cemetery. The dress she's wearing gives her the appearance of a restless spirit haunting the cemetery, and a chill slithers down my spine.

Don't be a fucking idiot. She's not a ghost.

I consider taking off after her, to demand answers. Why the fuck did she kiss me?

You kissed her, idiot.

But she didn't stop me. She was a willing participant. I can still feel the warmth of her arms around my neck, the way her fingers had threaded into my hair, the way her body had melted against mine.

I groan, spinning to face away from where she'd run. I can still taste the flavor of her lipstick on my tongue. I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

What the fuck was that!

One hand lifts to rub over my jaw, then my cheek, and I wince. It still stings from the slaps she nailed me with. The thought of them drags a smile out of me. Her eyes had been on fire, burning me up with her anger, and I *liked* it. It called to me, drew me in, invited me to dive in and burn. And for a moment I'd forgotten where we were, forgotten who we were and I turned into the person she knew from the texts, from the dares.

Fuck. Had she recognized me?

No, I dismiss that immediately. She wouldn't have fled. She'd have stayed to fight some more.

Something warm unfurls in my stomach. I *want* to fight with her again. I'm halfway back to school before I realize my intention is to search her out, and I stop, staring up at the dorm building. The light is on in her bedroom, and I'm tempted, so *fucking* tempted to go up there.

To kiss her again.

Instead, I stop on my floor and go to the room I share with Kellan. He's not there, which is no surprise. He lives for parties, *loves* them, and he's

desperate to wipe out the memory of last year, so I don't expect him to come back anytime soon, and when he does, he'll be drunk.

I strip out of my clothes, shower, and crawl into bed. I'm so fucking tired, but I can't stop replaying the kiss I shared with Arabella over and over in my mind. I twist and pull open the drawer on my nightstand so I can take out the burner cell. Switching it on, I stare at the unread messages I've sent. I'm tempted to send another, and ask her to meet up so I can ...

So, I can *what*? Finish what we started?

Groaning, I toss it to the floor and my hand slips beneath the sheets to wrap around my dick, the way I wanted to wrap it around her throat. I want to squeeze it until her breath hitches. I want her lips to part so I can delve deep inside. I want to hear her moan, and beg, and plead.

My hand moves up and down, from base to tip, squeezes and pumps until my hips are arching up and I throw my head back. I want my hand to be her mouth, sucking me down, swallowing me whole, while she's on her knees.

Fuck.

Lights flare behind my eyes, and wetness coats my hand and stomach. I need to get laid. That's all it is. I haven't had sex in months and it's messing with me.

It's not her I want. Not her who heats my blood.

Why are you lying to yourself?

I fall asleep to the memory of her naked on top of Churchill's coffin, my face between her legs and her moans in my ears.

"Close the blinds." I throw a hand over my eyes and growl the demand.

"Does *someone* have a hangover?"

My mattress bounces and the smell of coffee reaches my nose. I peer out from beneath my arm. Kellan is sitting at the end of my bed, two mugs of coffee in his grip.

"Give me that." I reach out for one and he hands it to me.

"You're welcome."

I grunt a reply, push up into a seated position and swallow a huge mouthful, ignoring the burn as it goes down.

"How was *your* evening?" He arches a brow.

"Boring."

"Is that so? Well, mine was ..." His lips stretch into a smile. "Amazing."

"Got someone to suck your dick, did you?"

“And then some!”

“Congratulations.” I throw back the bed covers and stand.

“Looks like you need someone to suck yours.” He eyes my morning wood and I scowl at him.

“Not interested.”

“I wasn’t offering.”

My cell vibrates and I snatch it up, frowning when there aren’t any messages. I hear another vibration and slowly my eyes move down to the cell on the floor. The screen is bright, a small envelope notification flashing in its corner.

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CHAPTER 83

ARABELLA

My eyes feel gritty, and no amount of rubbing them is making me feel any less tired. I spent most of the night tossing and turning, Eli's words echoing in my head. Mostly what he said about Zoey.

Who dared her? Was it the same person I've been in contact with? It would explain why she ended up in the cemetery.

If I'm honest with myself, I've been drowning in a heavy weight of rejection since the night my darer left me in the tomb alone.

I roll over onto my side. Lacy is still asleep, huddled under her blankets. When she stumbled into the room last night drunk, I helped her off with her heels and tucked her into bed. It gave me flashbacks to all the times I did the same thing for my mother. At least Lacy hadn't puked and left me to clean it up.

My thoughts stray back to the cemetery.

To the kiss.

To *Eli*.

Tension tightens my body. I'm desperate to wipe the memory out. To remove what happened with him from my head. Need and want stream out of me, coiled around something that is both terrifying and exhilarating. I'm not sure I can ignore it any longer. I've tried but it's been simmering beneath the surface, whispering at the back of my mind.

I grope beneath my pillow, find my second phone, and switch it on. The screen lights up, and a flood of messages arrive.

Unknown number: Did you see the photographs? Tell me how they made you feel. Did they make you wet?

Unknown number: I'm still waiting for your answer, Kitten.

Unknown number: I've already promised not to leave you alone again.

Unknown number: Do you know how hard I got from watching that video of you touching yourself?

Unknown number: This silence is only going to get you punished more.

Unknown number: I can't stop thinking about how good you tasted. I want to taste you again, but this time I won't stop.

An ache forms in the pit of my stomach.

Unknown number: Where's the girl I met in the dark? The one who isn't afraid to take risks?

Unknown number: Do you think about what we did in the dark? Do you make yourself come thinking about it?

Unknown number: Guess you're not done sulking yet. You know where I am when you remember what you really want.

What I really want.

To feel the way I had when he'd had his head between my legs. The pleasure had overwhelmed me until I'd been nothing but sensation. To feel desired and wanted. I need him to taste me, *touch* me.

I want to forget Eli.

Replace the kiss he gave me with something else, so it's no longer burned into my brain.

But can I trust my darer? What if he hurt Zoey?

I reread the messages. A tiny seed of an idea takes root. What if I set out to prove if he did or didn't have something to do with her death? I could ask him questions when we meet. See if he lets anything slip.

You're just trying to justify meeting up with a stranger in the dark to make yourself forget what you did with your stepbrother.

I silence the voice in my head, and slowly type out a message.

Me: I wasn't sulking. Last time I got hurt, and it scared me.

My finger hovers over the button, my stomach twisting with nerves. None of his messages mentioned my fall. He has to know about it, if he's really been watching me.

What if he doesn't reply?

Before I can let the thought take hold, I press send. I curl my fingers tightly around the phone. It buzzes a minute later.

Unknown number: And now?

Doubt and need war within me for a minute before I respond.

Me: I want to play.

Unknown number: Why?

Me: I'm not scared anymore.

A lie because I *am* scared. Terrified of rejection, of making the wrong decision. But I need to forget what Eli made me feel. Once I've forgotten

that there's anything other than hate between us, I'll stop with the dares.

Unknown number: Usual place, usual time, usual rules. Red or green?

I respond with one word.

Me: Green.

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CHAPTER 84

ELI

I stare down at the cell.

Why has she broken her silence after all this time?

“Your dick just got harder.”

I barely register Kellan’s words, just the amusement in his voice. “What?”

“Your dick is so hard I could use it as a baseball bat.”

“Hmmm.” I’m still not really paying him any attention as I tap out another message.

Me: Wear your Halloween outfit.

I toss the cell onto my bed and walk across the room. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“You should probably knock one out as well; otherwise, you’ll have blue balls all day.”

I don’t answer that, kicking the bathroom door shut and cutting off his laughter. I take a cold shower, in an attempt to cool down the heat in my veins. It doesn’t work. I’m still hard, there’s an ache in my balls, and I give up the fight and slide my hand over my dick. The sensation makes me groan, and I tip my head forward to rest it against the tiled wall. The icy water hits the back of my neck, but I pay it no attention, wrapped up in the thought of Arabella in her Halloween dress on her knees with my dick in her mouth.

Would she do that? Would she suck my dick without knowing who I am?

I build up the image in my mind. Her breasts straining against the impossibly tight dress. It had barely hidden a thing, only the underwear she’d been wearing kept her from revealing everything. It’s no wonder the swim team had stalked her. Who wouldn’t want to take a bite out of her?

My hand grips my dick harder, pumps faster.

Her lips had been soft, and she’d surprised me with her ferocity when she kissed me back. Her fingers had curled into themselves at the back of my neck, and she’d pressed her body tight against mine. I can still feel the imprint of her breasts pressed against my chest. Her hard nipples. Her soft curves.

I groan, feeling that familiar tension zipping through my veins.

How would her hands feel on my body? Would she be hesitant or confident? How many times has she used her mouth, her hands to get someone off? How many mouths have been where I want mine to be?

It doesn't matter. I'll wipe out the memories of anyone who has gone before. I'll make her want only me and what I can give her. I know her innermost thoughts, her desires. I know what she hides from everyone around her. I know what makes her wet.

My orgasm hits with an explosiveness that sends me reeling, and curses tumble from my lips as my vision wavers and dims. My legs are shaking, as rope after rope of cum splashes against the wall and down to mingle with the water.

"Jesus fuck," I whisper, then laugh. The sound is shaky.

What is she doing to me?

I've never reacted like this to someone. What is it about her? I'm supposed to hate her. I *do* hate her. So why do I want to fuck her until my name is the only thing she can scream?

The cafeteria is almost empty when we head down for breakfast. Most students are still sleeping off their hangovers from the punch Kellan spiked or from the alcohol they'd hidden in their rooms. The teachers turn a blind eye. As long as nothing untoward happens, they won't step in.

Kellan grabs breakfast and brings it over to our table. I'm hunched over a mug of coffee when the back of my neck prickles. I raise my head and clash gazes with blue eyes.

Time slows, stands still as we stare at each other. Her tongue peeps out from between her lips. Lips that are soft and plump. Lips that taste like honey. I mimic her action, running my tongue over my bottom lip, and pink fills her cheeks.

My gaze dips. She's wearing a plain t-shirt and her typical yoga pants. They hide her figure from prying eyes. A far cry from the dress she wore last night. But I know what her outfit hides. I've seen those lush curves up close and personal. When my eyes lift back to her face, the pink has deepened to a dark red.

One side of my mouth tilts up and her eyes widen. Something sparks between us, an awareness, and her lips part. Then the moment is broken by someone calling her name and she turns her head.

“I think I just got pregnant,” Kellan murmurs. “That was one hell of a look.”

“Don’t make plans tonight. We’re going out.”

He straightens in his seat. “We are? Is that what those texts were? She’s back in the game?”

I nod. “She wants to play.” A smile tugs at my lips, and I pull out the cell to send a text.

Me: Don’t wear underwear. Just the dress. And pigtails.

I hit send, and lean back on my seat, not even attempting to hide the fact I’m staring at her. Miles leans across the table and says something to her. Her shoulders hunch and her head lowers. His eyes meet mine.

“I wonder if she sucked his dick this morning.” There’s a thread of amusement in Kellan’s voice.

“Why?”

“Because it won’t have been her he was thinking about if she did.”

“You hooked up with him last night?” I switch my attention from Arabella to Kellan.

“I wanted to see if I was reading the signs wrong. Turns out I’m not as broken as I thought I was. He’s definitely bi ... or gay and in denial. Either way.” He shrugs. “He gave my dick a good time last night. He gives good head. He just needs a little guidance.” He smirks and sips his coffee. “He was an eager student and didn’t take much convincing to drop to his knees and open his mouth.” He twists in his seat. “Do you think they’d be up for a foursome? I could fuck him while you fuck her. They could watch each other getting off with the people they hate the most.”

My dick stirs. It likes the idea of fucking her. *I* like the idea. There’s no point in denying it. She brings my body to life in a way I’ve never experienced before.

CHAPTER 85

ARABELLA

Eli's eyes collide with mine the second my eyes find him across the cafeteria. Awareness zips between us, and I lick my lips. He copies the action. Heat rises in my cheeks at the slow sweep of his tongue across his bottom lip.

His gaze makes a slow, insolent journey down my body and then back up to my face. My stomach flips, cheeks on fire with mortification.

There's something different about the way he's looking at me. The air between us is intense. The longer he stares, the more I'm trapped in the gleaming green of his gaze.

I'm back in the cemetery, his lips are on mine. His tongue licks against mine. His body crushes me into the wall and the hard thrust of something pokes my belly through his jeans. I should be terrified but I'm not. Instead, lust blooms through me, my body softening with arousal.

My lips part.

"Arabella."

Miles calling my name breaks the spell, and I turn my head. Scurrying through the tables, I join him where he's sitting alone at our usual table.

He frowns as I sit down opposite him. "What's going on?"

"He cornered me in the cemetery last night and kissed me," I mumble, ducking my head down.

Miles leans across the table. "*Eli kissed you?*"

I nod, keeping my attention down. Every atom of my being is aware that my stepbrother is still staring at me.

"He must have set you up." The muscles in his jaw twitch, and he shifts his focus from my face to Eli. "I should never have left you alone at the party."

"Where did you go?" I can't keep the hint of betrayal out of my tone.

Miles' cheeks turn pink. "I felt faint and went outside to sit down. You were gone when I got back."

Eli is still staring like a creeper when I lift my head, and Kellan is grinning from ear to ear.

“It did get hot in there. That’s why I went for a walk. If I hadn’t gone into the woods, I wouldn’t have bumped into him.”

Miles reaches across the table and takes my hand. He threads his fingers through mine. “If he’d planned it, he would have found you no matter where you went.”

It makes sense. If it had been Eli’s plan all along to get me alone, it would have happened regardless. My anger from yesterday stirs back to life. Instead of crushing it down as I’ve always done, I leave it, letting it fill my veins.

“Let me grab you some food,” Miles squeezes my hand gently, oblivious to my emotions. “Toast with butter and coffee. White, no sugar, right?”

The fact that we know each other so well now makes me smile.

“Thanks.” I tug on his hand when he rises to leave. “Kiss me.”

Understanding ripples over his expression. One hand resting on the surface of the table, he leans over it as I half rise to meet him. His lips press against mine, but there’s no passion behind it. The whole thing is over as quickly as it started. I drop back into my seat as he walks away, trying to ignore the pang of disappointment.

Miles would be the perfect boyfriend if he wasn’t gay, and we were actually attracted to each other. It’s kind of ironic that we make a flawless fake couple.

Eli has ruined me with one single kiss. Maybe that was what he had planned all along in the cemetery.

I’m not brave enough to check to see what he made of the show. But I don’t need to turn to know he’s still there because my awareness of him leaves tingles over my skin.

Prey sensing a predator. The Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy has tasted my fear. How else does he plan to humiliate and degrade me?

I root around in my bag until I find my other phone, and check for messages.

Unknown number: Don’t wear underwear. Just the dress. And pigtails.

No underwear? I shift in my seat and press my thighs together. The skirt on that outfit is ridiculously high. If I bend over, I’ll flash my bare ass. *Is that what he wants?*

Memories of the last time I’d been without my underwear for him reel through my head. I can feel myself getting wet at the thought. But it’s offset by a small thread of trepidation.

He left me on edge, cold, horny, and unfulfilled.

What if he does that a second time?

Will I really be able to live that down?

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CHAPTER 86

ELI

“Are you sure you want me there? I’m not ready to get pregnant from another one of those looks you shared. I’m way too young to become a father.” Kellan laughs at his own joke.

“If she wants you to leave, you can. Otherwise, yes, I want you there.”

We walk through the cemetery gates and over to the tomb. I hand Kellan the key, and he unlocks it and steps inside.

“Get everything ready. I’ll go and meet her.”

He tips me a salute when he turns to close the door, and I head back to the bench where I’ve told her to meet me.

I wonder if she’s followed my instructions. She didn’t reply to either of the last two messages I sent. I take out my lip ring, pocket it, and pull down my ski mask as I turn the corner and my steps slow to a stop.

She’s there, in that impossibly short dress, sitting on the bench, legs together, hands tucked between her thighs, in her standard pose. Her hair is in pigtails, high on each side of her head, and the blindfold is over her eyes. The moonlight spills over her, making her look unreal, *otherworldly*.

I keep my footsteps silent and move to stand in front of her and just ... *stare*. She’s braless, unlike last night, her nipples hard and pressing against the thin material. I can see the outline of them through the dress. I don’t know if it’s caused by the chill in the air or anticipation of what might come.

I move around the bench until I’m behind her and lean forward. “Stand up,” I whisper against her ear.

She jumps, her sharp intake of breath going straight to my dick. Her hands move to either side of her body and she pushes herself upright, fingers finding the hem of her dress to tug it down over her ass.

“Leave it.”

She freezes.

“Why are you here?”

“I don’t ... What do you mean?”

“It’s been three weeks. I thought you’d ended the game. What changed your mind?” I continue my circuit until I’m standing in front of her.

“I want to play again.”

“Why?” I reach out and run my finger over the neckline of her dress. Her breasts are that close to spilling out that my thumb brushes over her nipples as I caress the material.

“I miss feeling something.”

“What do you feel right now?” I stroke up her throat, over her jaw and around the shape of her lips.

“Scared. Hot.”

“Wet?”

She nods.

“Say it.” I twirl one of the pigtails around my fingers.

“Wet.” Pink tinges her cheeks.

“Where?”

Her tongue slicks over her lips before she bites the bottom one between her teeth. I use my thumb to pry it free. “Where are you wet, Kitten? Are you wet right now?”

“Yes. Between my legs.” The pink in her cheeks deepens.

“You mean your pussy?”

She nods again.

“Then say it.”

“My ...” She clears her throat. “My pussy is wet.” Her cheeks are bright red now.

I tug one pigtail gently. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to put your mouth on me again.”

“Where?” The question comes out as a rough growl. The contrived innocence of her words is making me so hard, it fucking hurts. There’s *no* way she’s as naive as she sounds.

“Between my— I mean ... on my p-pussy. I want you to eat my pussy, and this time, I don’t want you to stop until I come.” The words come out in a rush, and she’s panting when she stops, like she’s just run a race.

“Hmmm.” I drop her pigtail and wrap my hand around her arm. “Let’s go.”

She doesn’t argue, doesn’t question where I’m taking her and when we reach the tomb, I press my hand to the top of her head. “Duck.”

She dips her head, and we walk inside. Kellan is sitting on the coffin and hops off when we arrive. His gaze runs over Arabella, a smile stretching his lips at the way the dress hides nothing.

“Take two steps forward,” I instruct her, and she moves forward cautiously. “I’m not alone tonight.”

Her head turns back and forth. I know she can’t see us from beneath the blindfold, and even if she could we’re both wearing masks.

“It’s up to you whether you want him to stay or not.”

“Will he touch me if he stays?”

“Only if you want him to.” I rest one hand on her shoulder. “Take another step forward. The coffin is directly in front of you. Turn around and climb up.”

“Why here?”

“Why not? We can go back to the bench if you like. I thought you might prefer a little privacy for what I’m going to do to you.”

She pauses in the middle of climbing onto the coffin, one leg up and her back to me. “What are you going to do to me?”

I step forward and palm her ass, pulling the material up until she’s uncovered, and I can see her pussy. My fingers dip down between her legs.

“I’m going to eat your pussy. My friend is going to record it. If you want him to, he might even join in.”

“Both of you?” she whispers.

I guide her up onto the coffin and push her down so she’s lying on her back. “You enjoyed having us both playing with your nipples, didn’t you? Our tongues licking, mouths sucking. Do you want us to do that again?” While I’m talking, Kellan is peeling the dress down from her breasts. When they finally spring free, pert and plump, he bends his head and captures a nipple between his lips.

She sucks in a breath.

“Red or green, Kitten?” I guide her legs apart and stand between them.

There’s a second of silence, and then she whispers, “Green.”

“Good girl.” I press a kiss to the inside of her thigh. “My friend is going to start the recording. We’ll upload it when we’re done so you can go back to your room and play with your pussy while you watch it.” Another kiss takes me closer to my target. Her legs shift, almost closing. “No sex, like before. My tongue on your pussy, his on your tits. At any point, if you say red, we stop.”

“For good?” There’s a note I don’t recognize in her voice, possibly concern that if she says red it’s over.

“For tonight,” I whisper, and run my tongue over her pussy.

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CHAPTER 87

ARABELLA

My hips move, jerk, with the first touch of his tongue between my legs. Strong hands grip my thighs, holding them immobile, the heat of his palms chasing the chill from my skin. The fact I can't see anything makes every touch more intense.

"She's soaked." He chuckles, his breath skating over my sensitive flesh. "You look pretty like this. Like a helpless little toy just waiting for me to play with you."

The hard stone of the coffin is cold against my back, and I can't stop trembling. Curling my fingers, I resist the urge to raise my arms as a ravaging mouth sucks on my nipple. Each little tug sends a sharp dart of pleasure through my breast and down to my groin.

A tongue touches my clit again, and my legs jerk in reaction. "Oh."

"Don't move," my darer rumbles, making my legs shake harder with one long lick. "You don't want me to stop, do you?"

"N-no." My breath is coming out in short, sharp pants, as pulsating adrenaline floods through my system. They excite every inch of me, and I'm wet. So fucking wet.

The hands on my thighs slide under my body to cup my ass. "Do you like showing us your pussy, Kitten? Is this what you wanted?"

Thumbs press either side of my clit and hold me open. Cool air licks over my fevered skin.

My clit throbs, my insides pulsing and clenching with the need to come.

"Please," I beg. "Please, don't stop. It hurts when you do."

The fingers on my ass flex. "You want it that bad?"

"Yes, yes. Please." The words come out in a sob. "I need it."

He licks me again, holding me in place, sealing his mouth over my clit. My other captor swaps to my other breast, drawing it into his eager mouth.

Intoxication washes over me until all I can do is feel. A finger pushes inside me, then a second. He fucks me with them, pumping in and out of me, fast and hard. Sensation merges together.

It's too much. Too overwhelming.

My hands grope downward, and fingers tangle in soft strands of hair on a head.

“S-stop.” The word leaves me on a keening cry.

“You know what word you need to say,” my darer growls. “Arms down. No touching.”

The word *red* gets stuck in my throat, and I can’t get it out. I drop my arms back down to the stone, and fight to catch my breath.

The mouth at my breast slows to a lazy sucking, but the one on my pussy continues to torment me without mercy. I’m burning up. The friction of the swirling tongue at my clit is almost too much to bear.

All the throbbing tension in me curls tighter and tighter. It builds, drawing me closer to the edge.

“I can’t.” I arch up to escape, but teeth bite down on the side of my breast. The pain is enough to curl my toes, my body shaking violently as I shatter into a climax. My mind goes blank.

Muscles locking in a wave of pleasure, a long, drawn-out moan escapes my throat. All the tension inside me explodes, shooting back up my body to leave me throbbing and pulsing. I try to hold onto the intense feeling, but it slowly fades away, leaving my heart beating at a rapid pace.

“Red or green?” A kiss is planted on my belly.

“Green.” My voice comes out in a throaty croak.

A tongue strokes over my clit, and I twitch.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Did you think I was stopping there, Kitten? We’re not done with you yet.” His mouth latches onto my clit again, and he sucks on it *hard*.

I grope for him in panic, and my wrists are encircled from above me and pinned down on either side of my head. I buck against the fingers thrusting inside me, my breasts jiggling with the movements. The second orgasm he forces on me comes swiftly on the heels of the first one and is almost painful.

I fall apart all over again.

“How many orgasms is that?” His voice is silky.

“T-two,” I stammer.

His mouth returns to my pussy. It’s though there’s an electrical current running straight from his mouth to my clit. The air locks in my throat. My hips undulate, and my pussy clenches.

“Three more to go.”

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CHAPTER 88

ELI

When her hands landed in my hair, I froze. I shouldn't have taken off my mask, but I'd realized after the first sweep of my tongue on her clit that it was going to get in the way. Luckily, Kellan thinks fast, and before she can reach for me a second time, he has her wrists locked in his grip and pinned above her head. We can check the recording later before uploading it to make sure my face isn't visible.

After her second orgasm leaves her shaking and whimpering, I ease up a little, soften my licks and transfer my attention to the fingers I have thrusting in and out of her. She's so fucking tight. So incredibly responsive to my every touch that it's taking every ounce of willpower I own not to shed my pants and bury my dick inside her.

But I promised no sex, and she is trusting me to hold to my word. For reasons I don't want to examine too closely, I don't want her to feel like she can't trust me with her body.

"Please, I can't. I need you to—" Her breathy whisper brings my head up.

"Red?"

Her head shake is immediate. "Just ... slow down. Please? Is there a color for that?"

I can't stop a chuckle from escaping. "Amber, Kitten. Amber for *'I think I like it, but I need some time to make sure.'*"

She nods. "Amber, then. Yes. Amber."

I ease my fingers out of her, smiling at her moan of protest and move around the coffin, so I'm standing beside her head. I stroke my finger, wet with her juices, across her lips.

"Open." Her lips part. "Lick." Her tongue comes out and curls around my finger. I slide it between her lips, deep into her mouth. When she's licked one clean, I replace it with the second. "Good girl. What do you think? Do you like how you taste?"

"It's ... different."

I smile and run my wet finger around a nipple. "Ready for round three?"

"Yes. Green."

“Do you want my tongue or my friend’s?”

“Yours.”

“I think we need to remove the dress first, don’t you? Sit up.”

Kellan helps her up into a seated position, and I draw the dress up over her body, pressing kisses to every inch of skin I reveal. My lips latch onto her nipple and I suck hard at it while Kellan pulls the dress over her head, careful to keep her blindfold in place. Her back arches, a throaty moan escaping her as I tease and tug on the taut bud between my teeth, while my hand finds its way back between her legs to stroke her clit. Her body jerks, still sensitive from the orgasms she’s had, but she doesn’t try and stop me.

“Such a good girl for me,” I whisper as Kellan eases her back down onto the coffin. “Keep those legs wide open, Kitten.” I kiss my way back down her body, run my tongue around her navel and then down until I’m feasting on her clit again.

“Oh god, ohmigod, oh *god!*” Her whispered words turn into unintelligible moans as her hips lift and she bucks and writhes against my mouth. I don’t let up sucking and licking. My fingers have her spread open, and she can’t avoid the attack of my tongue, no matter how much she twists and turns.

She’s panting, sobbing, mewling, *moaning* with pleasure, with need. She’s begging me to stop, but not once does she say *red*.

Her third orgasm rolls straight into a fourth and a scream tears from her throat, quickly muffled by Kellan’s hand over her mouth.

“Hush now,” he whispers. “You look so fucking beautiful. Just one more to go. You can do it. Come for us once more, pretty girl. If you bend your legs and lift your ass, he can bury his tongue inside your pussy. It’ll feel so good, I promise. Let him fill you up.”

His fingers are on her nipples, tugging and twisting, pulling and squeezing, and her legs lift, bend, and she places her feet flat on each side of my head. The position gives me perfect access to every single part of her. I push two fingers inside her and give one long lick, making her twitch, before pushing my tongue inside to join my fingers.

“Fuck his mouth, pretty girl. Take what he’s offering. So good. Well done. Almost there. You can feel it can’t you? Like fire under your skin. Don’t fight it, angel. Let it come. You’ll feel better,” Kellan croons as she sobs.

I can feel her inner muscles contracting around my fingers, and I draw back to run my tongue in one last circle around her clit. The move tips her over the edge, and she throws back her head and cries out, her body shaking with the force of her orgasm. I keep my fingers inside her, pumping leisurely in and out as she rides through the pleasure, and when her back relaxes back against the stone and her thighs start to tremble, I ease them out and gently draw her legs back down.

I press a kiss to her pussy.

“Good girl,” I whisper. “Rest for a few minutes. My friend is going to hand you a drink. It’s just a bottle of water. Take small sips.”

I straighten and move to where Kellan positioned the camera, careful to keep my face out of view. We’ll probably need to edit it before uploading it for Arabella to watch, just to make sure neither of us is recognizable. I stop the recording.

Kellan is sitting behind Arabella on the coffin, legs either side of her body, and letting her rest against him while she sips the water. Her entire body is flushed, nipples still hard, and I can’t resist taking a photograph of her. Her pigtails are uneven, and I cross the tomb so I can tug them loose. Her blonde hair falls around her shoulders. I dip my head to kiss each nipple and she sighs softly.

“It’s time for us to go. Stay here for five minutes. I’ll text you when it’s time to remove the blindfold. You’ll see a bag on the ground. It has a hoodie and sweats in it, and a pair of sneakers. Text me to tell me you’re safe back inside your room. Do *not* run. If you hear anything, it’ll be us. We’re going to watch you every step of the way back. No one will see you. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

I take the water bottle from her and trace the outline of her lips with my finger. “Good girl.”

CHAPTER 89

ARABELLA

I give a moan of protest when the solid, muscled body moves from behind me. I'm sleepy, lethargic, deliciously warm, and more relaxed than I've ever been in my life.

"Sleepy Kitten." There's amusement in his voice. "Stay awake and listen for the text."

I nod. "Okay."

Head dropping forward, I keep myself sitting up, knowing that if I curl up on the hard stone, I won't want to get up again. Shyness has me drawing my legs up to my chest. Wrapping my arms around them, I hug my knees tightly.

My orgasms had felt different. When I get myself off with my hand, the gratification is over in a flash. These had been sharper, more powerful. I had no control.

I feel good. Happy. Sated.

Is this what sex feels like? Is this why Elena is always after men?

I push aside the thought of my mother, not wanting to ruin my post-orgasmic glow. A buzz comes from somewhere on the floor.

Has it been five minutes already?

Slipping the blindfold off, I blink, letting my eyes adjust to the soft glow from the flashlight. Someone has left one on top of a bag on the floor. I smile when I see it.

Crawling off the coffin, my legs are two limp noodles. I can still feel the heat of their mouths between my legs and on my nipples. It takes a moment to steady myself before I move toward my phone.

Unknown number: Get dressed, Kitten.

As promised, there's a black hoodie, matching sweatpants, and a pair of sneakers in the bag. They're my size and still have the store tags on them. The material is soft and expensive. Once I'm dressed, I look around. The angel dress is on the floor beside the coffin. I stuff it into the empty bag, then I switch off the flashlight, and add it on top. I leave the bag where I found it.

I open the door and step outside. Silence greets me. I search for shadowy forms, knowing they must be close but see nothing. Huddled inside my new hoodie, I clutch the phone in my pocket and set off through the gravestones. I keep to a steady pace, listening for noises.

How do they manage to be so quiet? Are they ninjas?

The thought makes me giggle, and I sigh, enjoying the floaty feeling I've been left with. I watch for movement around the buildings as I cross the grass but see nothing. When I finally reach the door of the dorm, I turn to stare back at the darkness. For one brief second, I swear I see a slither of something before it vanishes.

He kept his promise.

I chew on my bottom lip, and smile. Sneaking to my floor, I'm surprised to find Lacy not in her bed when I enter our room. She must have spent the night with Brad.

A few taps on the screen of the phone, and I send a message.

Me: I'm back in my room.

A response comes instantaneously.

Unknown number: How do you feel?

A sweet aching throbs between my legs.

Smiling, I have to fight the urge to tell him it had been my first time. I'm supposed to be dating Miles.

Maybe he'll know? I'm not experienced. There must be signs, right?

Me: Tired, floaty. Thank you for the orgasms.

I sink down onto the edge of my bed and wait for an answer.

Unknown number: I have one final instruction for you. This isn't a dare. Take a bath. Not too hot. You took a lot tonight, and you're going to be sensitive. Bath, soak, bed. Don't forget a photograph.

Me: Okay.

I hug the phone to my chest, drop down onto my mattress and stare up at the ceiling for a moment. Tonight did not go as I expected.

It was so much better.

CHAPTER 90

ELI

Kellan disappears from our room almost as soon as we get there, saying he has a dick that needs sucking and a willing mouth to put it in. Before he leaves, he tosses me the cell we recorded the night's events on, then slips out of the door.

Arabella's moans and soft cries fill the room as I run through the recording. The angle Kellan positioned the cell phone in the tomb had been perfect, and the only shots of my head are from the back. The one time I do turn to face the camera, her leg is bent and it hides everything but the hair at the back of my head. Not enough to identify me, especially as the tomb was in shadows, cast by strategically placed flashlights.

Watching the way she got off on my tongue wakes my dick up and the rest of the recording is torture in the most delicious kind of way. I fist my dick and stroke myself to orgasm along with her.

A notification comes in as I'm cleaning myself up and I grab the cell and tap through to find a photograph of her from the neck down, covered in water and bubbles. Her breasts are visible, as are the teeth marks Kellan left, but her pussy isn't.

Me: Where's the rest? Put your legs either side of the tub, spread yourself open and show me your pussy.

A photograph comes through seconds later and I study the glistening pink flesh on display. I lick my lips, remembering how she tasted on my tongue, how she responded, and I grow hard again.

What is this fucking girl doing to me?

Every thought of her has me wanting to jerk off. Every time I see her, I want to pin her to the nearest surface and fuck her until she screams. What happened to the anger, the disgust at her barging into my family?

Me: Do you have any toys?

Kitten: I'm 18 years old. I think I'm a little old for toys.

I laugh.

Me: Not those kinds of toys, Kitten. Do you only get yourself off with your fingers? Or do you have anything else?

Kitten: Just my fingers.

Me: Do it now. Record it. Let me watch.

Kitten: I'm too sensitive.

Me: One more orgasm. I don't like odd numbers. Round it up for me.

I toss the cell to one side and take a shower. By the time I'm out, there's a new notification flashing on the screen and a recording of her fucking her fingers in the bathtub.

Kellan is already at our table when I finally drag my ass out of bed and head to the cafeteria for breakfast. I haven't slept well, waking up often to the memory of Arabella's moans and my hand on my dick.

I slump onto the seat opposite him and drag a mug of coffee in front of me. He arches an eyebrow.

"You look rough."

"Tired."

"We have math first thing."

I groan. "I think I'll skip it. Not like I do fuck all in the class anyway. Take notes. Explain it to me later."

"And where will you be?"

"I'll work on my sculpture."

His eyes flick past me, and a smile flickers across his face.

"Morning, Miles," he croons. "You look positively dashing this morning."

I choke on the mouthful of coffee I've just taken.

Kellan's smile turns into a smirk, and he lowers his voice. "He's in denial. He's happy to suck my dick in the dark, but daylight comes, after *I* do of course, and he's all ..." He clears his throat and does a fair impression of the swim team captain. "This was a mistake. I'm not gay."

"Does he swallow?"

Kellan nods.

"Then he's gay ... or bi. A mistake is tripping and landing on someone's lap. Your mouth doesn't accidentally slip onto another guy's dick and swallow their cum."

Kellan snickers. "You know, that's what *I* said." He props his chin onto his hand and makes no secret of the fact he's staring at Miles. "But he's pretty, so I'll forgive him."

"Do you think she knows?"

“Fuck, no. Look at them. They’re holding hands and smiling at each other like no one else exists. I doubt he knows she spent last night riding your face, either. I’m pretty sure they’re not that open with each other.”

“*She* doesn’t know she spent last night riding my face.” I laugh into my coffee mug. “This is so fucked up.”

“I warned you. You can’t say I didn’t. And now look at what’s happening. I bet you don’t plan on driving her away anymore.”

My sigh is heavy. “I don’t know, Kell. She’s sneaking out in the dark to let a stranger tongue-fuck her yet claims she’s nothing like her mother. You see the problem I’m having here? Which one is the real Arabella?”

“Can’t she be both?”

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CHAPTER 91

ARABELLA

I head for the bleachers, where the cheerleaders are meeting. We have a free period, and Lacy wants to go through some new moves. The late morning sun is unusually warm against my face, and I'm still daydreaming about last night. I woke up this morning with my hand shoved down the front of my panties, my fingers filling me up. Although I'd been sore, I still managed to make myself come.

There had been no messages from my darer when I checked, and it was hard not to feel disappointed.

He said he was going to show me the video.

I get wet at the thought.

I should check the cloud later to see if it's there. No, he'd tell me if he's uploaded it. I just need to be patient.

Lacy, Tina, and Linda are with their heads together, sitting on the first row of the bleachers. Tina has her cell out, and all of them are giggling. Quickening my pace, I hurry to join them.

"Hey, Arabella," Linda calls when she sees me. "Did you have fun at the party on Saturday?"

I study her grinning face. "What's going on?"

Tina shoves her phone in my face. "Care to tell us what happened *after* you kissed Eli?"

An image fills my vision. It takes a second for me to absorb what it is, and when I do, everything inside me turns cold. The photograph is of me with my arms wrapped around Eli's neck, our lips locked together in a passionate kiss. The one that should never have happened. A moment I had forgotten about, thanks to my darer last night.

My hand automatically searches for the soothing presence of charms on the bracelet on my other wrist, only it's not there. Tensing, I scrape my nails over the bare skin.

Lacy pulls a face of disgust. "I can't believe you kissed your brother."

Tina's smug expression freezes on her face. "What did you just say?"

My roommate blinks, owl-like, at her question. "Oh, I shouldn't have said that."

Linda is staring at me, open-mouthed, beside her. “You and Eli are brother and sister?”

I fight my rising panic. “We’re stepsiblings. His dad married my mom.”

“And why don’t we know about this?”

Lacy shrugs, not meeting my gaze. “Arabella wanted to keep it a secret. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to let it slip. I’m sure the girls won’t tell anyone.”

Tina is already typing away on her phone, a cruel smile curving her lips.

A secret she’s announcing to the fucking world on the heels of a damning photo.

No, no, no. This cannot be happening. Let it just be a nightmare I’m about to wake up from.

Leaning out of her seat, Tina dangles the screen of her phone in front of my face again. “Isn’t this incest?”

“It’s only incest if they share the same parent by blood,” Linda corrects her. “Not if they’re stepsiblings.”

The need to escape has me in a chokehold.

“I’m not feeling good. I’m going to skip practice today.” I spin on my heels, forcing myself to walk and not run as far from them as I can get.

Oh, god. Everyone is going to know. That photo of us, and the fact we are stepsiblings will be plastered everywhere. Kill me now. Who took the photo? There was no one in the cemetery. Just me and Eli ...

An unpleasant thought worms its way through my head. If the kiss had been a setup, had the photograph been the goal?

I’m halfway across the campus when some sixth sense makes me look up. Eli is sitting on a wall, with a sketchbook balanced on his knee. Head down, he’s absorbed in drawing.

The dark-haired boy with angry green eyes.

My nemesis.

He sits alone, a shield of indifference wrapped around him.

The sight of him is like setting a match to a flame. Rage and betrayal swirl in a tight, fierce ball inside my chest. It adds to the weight of everything that’s been pouring into the dam of feelings I’ve kept in check for so long. Adding to all the years of the trauma of Elena’s failure to be the parent I need. My loneliness. The sense of never belonging.

I storm up to him, and I knock the sketchbook off his knee, rage overshadowing any fear I have for him.

“You’re disgusting and pathetic. Let me guess. You had Kellan lurking in the dark ready to take the photo? That’s why you kissed me, so you could just use it to humiliate me more.”

He’s silent for a beat, brow furrowing, and then his lips curl in a cruel smile. “Frightened Miles will dump you now, knowing you’re kissing other guys behind his back? It has to make him wonder if you’re spreading your legs for them too.”

I want to grab the padlock on its chain around his neck and choke him with it.

“You bastard.”

“I hope he wears a condom when you fuck. He wouldn’t want to be stuck with a little accident that comes with a price tag.”

I lunge at him, but an arm around my waist drags me back, preventing me from clawing his eyes out.

“Easy, Arabella.” Miles holds on tight.

Eli laughs, gathers his things, and walks away.

Struggling in my friend’s arms, I fight to charge after my stepbrother. “I’m going to kill him.”

“As much as I want to see Travers gone, I don’t want you being locked away for homicide.”

“There’s a photograph!” The three words leave my lips in a shriek, my eyes glaring at his back as he retreats.

Miles’ hold on me loosens. “A photograph?”

“Of him kissing me.”

“Shit.”

I straighten when he lets me go. “Tina showed it to the other girls on the cheer squad. You were right. It was a setup. Kellan must have been hiding in the bushes, waiting to snap the perfect shot. The worst part is Lacy told everyone that he’s my stepbrother.”

Miles groans. “There’s no way Tina is going to keep her mouth shut about that.”

I drop down onto my haunches, and cover my face with my hands, the anger leaving me in a rush. Tears blur my vision. “My life is over.”

Miles sinks down beside me. “No, it’s not.”

“Everyone is going to gossip about me because of him.”

He places a warm hand on my back. “They’ll be talking about something else in a few weeks.”

The sick feeling in my stomach only grows. “I’m not so sure about that. He did this on purpose! To alienate me from everyone. He’s dead set on making my life miserable.”

“Breathe.”

I swat at the tears blazing a path along my cheeks. “I hate him so much it hurts. I wish Eli Travers never existed.”

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CHAPTER 92

ELI

It takes a moment for her accusation to sink in. Once it does, I go into autopilot, and words spill from my lips without conscious thought. My only desire is to get out of the way and process what she's screaming at me.

When Miles grabs her, holding her back from attacking me, I mask my relief, grab my stuff and stalk away. I tuck my sketchbook under an arm and fish out my cell. Kellan answers on the first ring.

"Someone leaked a photograph of me kissing Arabella on Halloween. She thinks I did it."

I hold my cell away from my ear while he laughs. When he shows no sign of stopping after a minute, I bark his name. "It's not fucking funny."

"It kinda is, though. Of all the things you've done, she picks the one you're innocent of. There's got to be some kind of divine justice in that."

"Who's fucking side are you on?"

"Yours, of course, but I warned you, Eli. I *fucking* warned you this would backfire."

"Do you think you could stop gloating for a second?" I round the corner and push open the door to the dorm building. "Are you in our room?"

"No. I'm in the computer block. I'm supposed to have an ... assignation in thirty minutes." His voice is rich with innuendo.

"You're waiting to get your dick sucked again? If it's by the person I think you're expecting, he might bail. His girlfriend has just gone postal on me, and I'm not sure he's going to get away from her right now."

"Hmmm, true. Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes. Try not to kill anyone until I arrive. I'll drop a text to my *very-straight-and-not-remotely-obsessed-with-sucking-my-dick* friend to tell him we'll reschedule."

He ends the call, and I walk through the hallway to the stairwell at the end. There are a couple of seniors standing near the door, and their conversation stops as I pass them. I don't acknowledge their presence, but there's an itch between my shoulders and the hair on the back of my neck rises, and I'm sure they're staring at me as I head upstairs.

Has the entire school seen the photograph? Is it on the school's social media app?

It's the first thing I check the second I step inside my room, and there it is. Front and center on the main feed is a photograph of us with Arabella tagged in it. The caption has me clenching my jaw.

Arabella Gray—Not only a monster-fucker, but a brother-fucker too.

I tap on the account, but it's brand new and simply called *CBA's Finest Hour*.

Fuck.

I tap on the post notifications and set it to follow. A stupid idea because by the time Kellan arrives, my cell is blowing up with comments and reactions to the post. My friend takes one look at my face and snatches my phone away. He taps away, frowning, and then looks up at me.

"How can they tell it's you?"

"What?"

"The angle of the photograph. Arabella's face is clear, but yours isn't." He points at our faces on the screen. "Look at the way her arm is looped around your neck. The shadow from it covers half your face. It could be anyone. Nothing about it makes it clear it's you."

"Aside from the Nine Inch Nails hoodie I'm wearing, you mean?"

"You can't be the only person in the school with that hoodie."

I stare at him.

"Okay, fine. But still, whoever took the photograph knew it was you before the face sucking started."

I rub a hand over my face. "So, you think *she* set it up?"

"No. Fuck's sake, Eli. You're not fucking stupid." He jabs the side of my head with one stiffened finger. "Use your brain."

When I say nothing, he groans and rolls his eyes. "Did all the pussy eating you've been doing rot your brain? You said someone chased her to the cemetery that night, so *someone* knew she was there. I bet they hung around, saw you guys, and took the opportunity presented."

I pace the room, thinking. "Miles. If he's hooking up with you, he's going to want eyes to be elsewhere."

"Can't be Miles. He was sucking my dick while you were sucking Arabella's face." He crosses to his bed and stretches out, tucking his hands behind his head. "No, he has no reason to out her. It looks bad on him if his girlfriend is off doing nasty shit with another guy. They've already had a disagreement over ..." He lifts his head, smiling.

"What?"

“Didn’t Jace try to kiss her once? Or maybe it was Lacy. She’s always trying to get into your pants. Maybe this isn’t about Arabella, but about you?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter who the target is. She thinks *I* did it.” It annoys me. “I’ve never been anything but upfront about the things I’ve done to her.”

“You mean, other than stripping her naked, taking photographs of her, and eating her pussy without her knowing it’s you?” Kellan’s voice is dry.

“That’s different. She wants it like that. She likes not knowing who it is.”

Besides, the only reason I do it is because her diary talks about her secret desires, the darkest part of herself which gets off on being made to do things, *dirty* things with a masked stranger. I thought it might prove that she was just like her mother, willing to turn tricks for gifts and money. The only thing I’ve managed to discover is that I’m addicted to her.

I spin to the door. “I need to talk to her.”

Kellan shoots upright. “Is that wise, Eli? She’s angry right now. Do you really think going up and telling her it was your face she was coming all over last night is the right thing to do?”

“I’m not going to put it like that.” I glare at him.

“What other way is there to put it? You’re not thinking straight.”

“She fucking thinks I set her up!”

“You *are* setting her up!” He lowers his voice, and sighs. “Just not about the photograph.”

My head is spinning. I’ve never had a problem with getting blamed for things I haven’t done before, but this time it’s different, and I can’t leave it alone.

“I’m going to find her.” I pull open the door and walk out before he can stop me.

I walk up the stairs to the next floor and stop outside Arabella’s room. I can hear voices inside, but not the words they’re saying. I knock before I can talk myself out of it.

The door opens a second later, and Arabella’s eyes widen when she sees me standing there.

“We need to talk.”

When she goes to close the door, I slap my hand against it, shove it out of her grip and walk in. Miles is there, sprawled on her bed, and he jumps to

his feet when he sees me.

“Get out.”

I summon up a sneer. “Make me.”

We glare at each other, until Arabella steps between us, her hand resting on Miles’ arm. My jaw clenches.

“What do you want?”

“Him to fuck off, so I can talk to you.”

Her chin rises and she meets my eyes. There are still sparks of fury in their depths and, sick bastard that I am, it turns me on. “Whatever you have to say, you can do so in front of Miles.”

“Oh, can I?” I shift my attention to Miles. “You should leave. Unless you’d like to talk about what *you* were doing on Halloween?”

Her fingers tighten on her boyfriend’s sleeve. “Do you know what, Eli? Just get out. You have nothing to say that I want to hear. You’ve had your fun. Got your kicks.”

“It wasn’t me.”

Her laugh is high-pitched. “Of course not.”

“Why the fuck would I post a photograph of us making out?”

“So the school could see that the Monster of Churchill Bradley has struck again! So you can humiliate me further by showing everyone I had a moment of weakness and turned to *you*. Well, congratulations. You got what you wanted. Now everyone knows I kissed the fucking monster. Now *get out!*” She screams the last words at me.

“What’s going on?”

I glance back at the question to see the door at my back open with Lacy, Brad, and Tina crowding together in the doorway. The distraction costs me, and I miss Arabella raising her arm. Her palm connects with my cheek in a stinging slap that echoes around the room.

I slowly bring my face back around to her. “Are we going to do this again?” I’m trying, fucking trying, to be calm about this. But she’s not making it easy.

“You’re a fucking monster, Eli Travers, and I fucking hate you.”

She lifts her hand to hit me again and Miles grabs her wrist. The word ‘monster’ rings around my head and I nod slowly.

“Okay.” My voice is soft. “Just remember this moment because what happens next is on you, *Princess*.”

I turn on my heel, push my way through the gaping seniors and stalk down the hallway.

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CHAPTER 93

ARABELLA

The mottled metal-gray of twilight stretches shadows among the trees, making the cemetery a little eerier. Searching through the leaves and the dirt, I see no sign of my friendship bracelet.

Where is it?

I don't remember the last time I had it on my wrist. I'm so used to having it there that it feels like part of me is missing.

My phone buzzes, but I ignore it. After the showdown with Eli in my room Lacy and her friends have thrown non-stop questions at me. I've been tagged in notification after notification, each one nastier than the next.

Arabella Gray—Not only a monster-fucker, but a brother-fucker too.

Arabella Gray and the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy.

I'm under the scrutiny of every student at the academy. The whispers start whenever I enter a room. Strangers stare at me, assess me. I catch the words *Travers* and *sister*.

"Where is it? Where is it?" The chant leaves me over and over, the anxiety I've been carrying all day building in my chest. Moving to the tomb, I descend the steps and try the door. The metal padlock rattles when I shake it.

Every breath I take feels clogged in my throat, as if there's a hand squeezing my windpipe. My legs go weak, and I sink to the ground. I can't move. I'm struggling to breathe. The salty taste of my tears is on my lips as they trickle down my face. I'm not sure how long I kneel in the dirt until the panic attack eases.

Drained and trembling, I grope in my bag for my phone, but when I open my hand, I'm holding the wrong one.

Does he know? He must have seen the photo and tags plastered all over social media.

This isn't fair. Eli has already tainted the way people here see me. I don't want my darer to believe the lies.

Fresh tears brim in my eyes. Wiping them away with the knuckles of my free hand, I type out a message.

Me: It's not true what they are saying on the school's social media. Eli is my stepbrother through marriage, not blood. The kiss wasn't my fault. He tricked me. He hates me. All he wants to do is hurt and embarrass me because he blames me for our parents getting married. I am not the girl he imagines me to be. I'm not like my mother.

I press send, tears dripping down onto the screen. Minutes tick by, and there's no response, so I send another message.

Me: Please believe me. I'm not lying.

The sound of my other phone ringing distracts me. I pull it out of my bag and check the caller ID before answering.

"Where are you?" Miles' voice is anxious.

"I just needed some space." My words end in a sob.

"Are you crying?"

"N-no."

"You're missing dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

Miles sighs softly. "Bella ..."

Clutching the phone tightly, I screw my eyes shut against the image of all the faces laughing at me in the cafeteria. "I'm not going to sit there while everyone stares at me like I'm some kind of freak. I've already seen the posts and tags."

"Where are you? You can't be out after curfew."

"I'll text you later." I end the call.

The phone starts ringing again, but I switch it off. There are no texts waiting on my other cell. Desperately trying to quell the panic building inside me, I text him again.

Me: Please talk to me. Why did you stop daring me? It was the one thing that made me feel alive since I got here.

Unknown number: Why do you care what anyone else thinks?

Relief courses through me.

Me: I can't help it and then I start overthinking. The thoughts won't stop circling in my head and I feel like I'm drowning.

Unknown number: What thoughts?

Me: That everyone is judging me because of something that was out of my control. I don't fit in here.

Unknown number: No? You seem to fit in just fine.

Sadness is a sharp pain in my chest.

Me: Do I? Everyone hides behind a mask.

Unknown number: Not everyone. Some people are exactly what you see.

Me: What do you see when you look at me? Why did you pick me for the dares?

Unknown number: My reasons don't matter. What I see doesn't matter. What do you see when you look at your reflection? That's the only thing that matters.

I glance away from the screen, blinking back tears. What do I see? He wants me to be honest.

Me: I see a girl who doesn't know who she is anymore. I thought I did. Then things changed. You showed me things that made me question myself.

Unknown number: Are you sure that's what happened? Because it seems to me that you are lying to yourself about who you are. If fitting in is so important to you, why isn't it making you happy?

The truth hurts.

Me: Because Eli is right. I shouldn't be here.

Unknown number: Do you believe that or are you just conforming to someone else's opinion?

My attention shifts to the plaque on the stone column. The words Zoey Rivers are carved in metal.

Me: I believe it.

Unknown number: That's a shame. I thought you had more fight in you.

I frown at his words, a spark of anger igniting under the sadness I'm wallowing in.

Me: Is that what I'm supposed to do? Fight back against the world? Fight my stepbrother?

CHAPTER 94

ELI

I roll onto my back and read the text again. To me, the answer is obvious. If I was in her position, I'd be collecting weapons ready for the battle ahead. But she's not me, and the enemy she wants to fight is ... well, *me*.

The irony of that isn't lost on me. I'm sprawled on my bed trying to convince the girl I'm supposed to hate to fight back against the person who is making her miserable. Is that irony or just sheer fucking stupidity?

Me: Why did you let me strip you naked and put my mouth on you?

Kitten: I don't know.

Me: You know better than that. Think about it.

Kitten: Because I liked it, and it made me feel good.

Me: Do you think someone weak would have been brave enough to do that? Or are you just hungry for any attention?

Kitten: Maybe I'm just crazy for doing it. Like you said, what good girl would let a stranger do that to her in the dark?

Me: I'd argue that a VERY good girl would do that. But you didn't answer the question.

Kitten: I like your attention.

Me: Do I need to insist you get your ass to the bench, Kitten? Answer my question. Do you think someone weak would be brave enough to do what you've done?

Kitten: No.

Me: I'm not convinced. Where are you?

Kitten: The cemetery.

I'm off the bed seconds after the text comes in.

"Where are you going?" Kellan asks as I pull on a plain black t-shirt and sweats. A black hoodie is next and then sneakers.

"For a run." I don't know why I don't tell him the truth. Probably because he'll give me shit about it.

"Hmm." His lips curl up and he lifts his hands to make air quotes. "A run. Got it."

I don't reply, pull up the hood and leave the room. The hallway is silent and empty, and I make it outside without anyone crossing my path.

What the fuck are you doing? I don't know the answer, but as the cemetery comes into view, I take out my lip piercing, then lift my cell.

Me: I need you to stand up and walk to the tomb. Face the door.

Kitten: Green.

Movement follows the text, and she rises like a ghost and walks slowly to the tomb. Questioning my sanity, I move up behind her and press my hand over her mouth.

"Don't scream. It's me, Kitten. Nod your head."

She gives a jerky nod and I relax my hold on her mouth. "Stay where you are. I'm going to unlock the doors. Go inside. Sit on the tomb, facing away from the door."

I unlock the door and step back, turning away so she can't see my face as she walks past. I sing the first verse of 'Toxic In You' by Palaye Royale, and follow her inside, keeping my head down. A quick glance shows she's followed my instructions, but I pull the doors closed, sealing us inside.

The darkness is absolute. Without any flashlights or cell phone displays, there is no natural light source inside. I've been here often enough not to need any, and I take another step forward, then sink to the ground.

"You're having a spectacular pity party, Kitten. Is it a solo event or can anyone join in?"

"It's not a pity party! You weren't there. You didn't see what happened."

"I heard about it, though. So, you were caught swapping spit with a guy who isn't your boyfriend. Who the fuck cares?"

"I care."

I laugh softly. "Do you? What part do you care about? The part where people found out or the part where you liked it?"

"I *did not* like it." She almost spits the words at me, and in my head, I envision the fire in her eyes.

I tut. "Oh, Kitten, are you lying to me now? I've seen how your body responds to pleasure. I couldn't have slipped a credit card between the two of you. You were plastered against him, head to toe."

"He surprised me."

"Do you often react that way to surprises? I'll be sure to shock you more often." I rise to my feet and feel my way across to the coffin. My hand

touches her shoulder, and she jumps.

“Hmmm. That would be a no on shocks causing kisses.”

“You were there!” It wasn’t a question.

“I was.”

“Did you take the photograph?”

“No. I didn’t take it and I didn’t share it. But what does it matter who did it?”

“Because he did it to destroy any friendships I’ve been building.”

“And you know that for certain, do you?”

“Yes!”

“Then why are you cowering away, like you’re the one who did something wrong? Where’s the girl who walked to a bench in the middle of the night, took off her clothes and stood there naked so a man in a mask could look his fill at her? Where’s the girl who let that man and his friend touch her? Where’s the girl who rode through five orgasms on a stranger’s tongue, then went home and fucked herself to a sixth?” My fingers slide around her throat and grip it, pulling her back until her head rests against my chest. “Where’s the girl who demanded my attention? Because I don’t see her here. I see a weak, pathetic mockery of that girl.”

I lower my head and run my tongue over her ear. “If that girl was here right now, she’d be naked, her legs spread wide while I feasted on her. *That* girl deserves my attention. But she’s not here. You asked why I picked you, but really what you should be asking is, what reason are you giving me to stay? If you’re too weak to play, then ...” I flex my fingers, drop my hand and step back.

“You asked why I stopped daring you. So here you go, Kitten. Here’s my dare to you. Get up and fight. If you want a place at this school, fight for it. Fight the world.” I press my lips to the side of her neck. “Fight your stepbrother.” I tug the opening of her hoodie away from her shoulder and seal my lips against her throat, sucking hard enough to leave a bruise just over where the pulse beat rapidly. “Fight *me*.”

CHAPTER 95

ARABELLA

The pull of his lips as he sucks on my neck makes me wet. I moan, tilting my head to give him more access, but he lifts his mouth from my throat.

“Fight me.”

My body heats up at his challenge. His impassioned words ring out in my head, feeding the anger I keep on burying. I’ve been keeping my head down all my life. Staying out of trouble. Why shouldn’t I let my fury out? I’ve swallowed it down for years, and where has it gotten me? My home is gone. My secure life has been torn apart. My mother has shipped me off to boarding school. I have a stepbrother who probably wants to kill me.

Every monster has a weakness.

What is Eli’s?

A hand finds my jaw, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. My tongue darts out to taste it. Possessed by the need to please him, I suck the tip into my mouth.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

Taking that as a good sign, I swirl my tongue around it. One second, I’m sitting on the coffin. The next, I’m on my feet in the dark with a muscled chest pinning me to the side of the stone.

“Are you going to cower, Kitten? Are you going to let them win?”

My anger rises, and I shove at him, exploding into a struggle. “I’m going to fight.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“I am going to fight you, and I’m not too weak to play.”

With a hard jerk, he has me against the hardness of his torso, and I flinch, automatically expecting pain, but it doesn’t come.

“There’s the girl I know.” His nose skims my cheek.

Hips pressing into mine, he slowly grinds into me. Lust roars through me, and I melt into him willingly, reveling in the sensation.

The hand on my jaw slides to my neck and squeezes gently, the fingers of his other hand tangling in my hair. “Don’t let go of that anger. Use it. Feed it. Don’t back down.”

I wait for his lips to find mine but instead, they land back on my neck. He groans against my flesh, the vibration making me shiver.

My hands grope out in the dark landing on something soft covering his shoulders. Skimming a path down to his biceps, I dig my nails into the corded muscles under the material of his hoodie.

He nuzzles the spot just below my ear. A needy throb is pulsing between my legs, aching with an unfamiliar urge to be filled. My heart spins wildly and I tilt my hips to meet his movements. We're practically dry humping each other with our clothes on.

His fingertips leave my jaw to trail down to my collarbone, then lower to cover my breast through my clothes. I burn where he touches, the places he leaves tingling in its wake.

A tongue circles my earlobe. "Don't ever stop fighting."

I whimper in response, rubbing myself frantically against the hardness poking into my stomach, trying to alleviate my ache.

A hand closes over mine. Guiding it down, he brings it to something solid between his legs. My breath hitches. I don't resist as he dips my fingers beneath the waistband of his sweats. The tips of my fingers brush something rigid, hot, and velvety.

"Touch me." He whispers, ratcheting up my arousal.

I curl my fingers tentatively around his cock, his hand still controlling my movements. He shudders at my touch, burying his face in the crook of my neck. I caress his length up and down, hesitantly at first, unsure what to do, then faster when his hand urges me into a steady pumping rhythm.

He grunts. "Squeeze harder."

Clenching my fingers, I feel his cock jerk beneath them.

The way he moans in pleasure has me wanting to give him everything. Being like this makes my world a little more bearable. It's a drug, and I'm high on it. It doesn't matter that he's not touching me because I feel heady with a sense of power I've never experienced before.

His hips lurch into my hand. I continue to stroke him until a sticky warmth coats my palm and fingers. He sags against me, and groans softly. The darkness cocoons us, and it's as though we're in our own little world. The only thing I can hear is the sound of his harsh breathing.

I rub my cheek against the side of his head, his hair a soft pillow. Emotions tremble inside me, but I don't try to define them.

He's dared me to fight.

And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

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CHAPTER 96

ELI

I should move away, send her back to the dorm. I'm risking everything standing this close to her. If she realizes who I am right now, there's no way she'll believe I haven't planned this. But her hands on me were the last thing on my mind when I came to find her.

When my breathing steadies, I lift my head and carefully draw her hand out of my sweats.

"You need to go back before curfew starts."

"No, I want to stay here."

I duck my head and brush my lips along her jaw. Her head turns, and I know she's seeking out my mouth to kiss me. But I can't risk that. She might guess who I am, so I catch her chin between my finger and thumb and exert gentle pressure until she turns away. I kiss a leisurely path to her ear.

"Fight the world tomorrow, Kitten. Tonight, do as I say," I whisper.

I take a step backward. "Give me five minutes. I'll text you."

I drag my hood back up, and ease open the door. Moonlight spills through the gap and I slip through before she can see too much of me and close the door. I don't wait around and set off at a jog through the cemetery. But I don't want to leave her to go back alone. Not after the last time I left her, so I duck down near the bench and then text her.

Me: Time to go, Kitten.

A slim figure appears and moves past me at a slow jog. When I'm certain she's out of sight, I set off in the other direction toward the secret entrance that will take me back to the dorm. I pull off my hoodie once I'm inside, just in case anyone sees me, and I leave it near the entrance that'll bring me out in the boys' restrooms in the main school.

An alarm goes off on my cell as I move through the hallway. Fifteen minutes until curfew kicks in. Time enough to call in a favor or two. I navigate through the apps on my cell, find a local pizzeria and order a selection of pizzas with basic toppings, three sides and four drinks—Coke, lemonade, coffee, and hot chocolate—times three. Then I take a slow stroll down to the main gates, where there are two security guards.

“It’s too late to be going out, Eli,” one of them says.

I smile. “I’ve ordered food. A couple of us missed dinner. I was working on my sculpture and lost track of time. There’s a pizza delivery coming. Three of everything. Keep one set for yourselves, and bring one to me and the other to this room, if you wouldn’t mind?” I give him the floor and room number I want it delivered to.

“Don’t make a habit of it.”

“No, sir.” I tip him a salute and head back to the dorm. Arabella should be safely in her room by now, with no risk of crossing my path.

I ignore the looks and whispers from other students as I walk through the building and up the stairs to my floor. The door to my room is unlocked when I get there and Kellan is sitting on his bed, eyes trained on the television on the wall as he grips a games controller in both hands and swears at people through the headset.

He throws me a smile, but doesn’t speak, and I wave as I pass him, grabbing fresh clothes as I go, and head into the bathroom for a shower.

I’m back out just as there’s a tap on the door. “I ordered pizza,” I explain in response to Kellan’s frown.

“Oh. Guys, I’m out. Food’s arrived.” He switches off the game and tosses the headset and controller to one side.

I’m up with the sunrise and sneak out without waking Kellan so I can take my run without being disturbed. Earbuds in my ears, I follow my usual path through the woods, through the cemetery, where I pause to lock up the tomb, and then around the back of the school. The entire route takes about an hour, and students are starting to appear when I finally get back to the dorm building.

Even though I took a shower before bed, I take another one and then join Kellan for breakfast. As we walk down, I pull out my cell.

Me: Ready to go to war, Kitten? Today’s dare. No more hiding behind hoodies and yoga pants. I want to be able to see your figure when I catch sight of you. Give me something to look forward to. Red or green?

I don’t bother waiting for a reply. I’ll get my answer when I see her today. Anticipation zips through my veins. What move will she make today? Will she stand up and fight like she said in the dark of the tomb? Or

will she change her mind and cower like the prey I thought she was when she first arrived?

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I'm eager to walk into the room where all the other students are milling.

Kellan veers off when we enter, and heads into the line to pick up breakfast. I walk across the room to our table and drop onto a seat to wait for him. I scan the room. No sign of her yet, although her roommate, Lacy, is there holding court with the rest of the cheer squad. She glances over at me, catches me looking and looks away quickly, only to look again a few minutes later.

Kellan takes the seat opposite me, blocking her from my view and I reach for my coffee, only to freeze when Arabella walks in, Miles beside her.

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CHAPTER 97

ARABELLA

“Your moods have changed so quickly over the last twenty-four hours, I think I have whiplash,” Miles says in a low voice, as we walk toward the cafeteria. “I’m not sure I can keep up, but I do like your change in wardrobe. You look less like a homeless person, and more like a college student.”

My hair is loose around my shoulders. I’ve brushed it until it shines. The faded skinny jeans are something Amanda talked me into buying just before my life was turned upside down. Hidden in the back of my drawer, I hadn’t gathered up the courage to wear them until now. I’ve matched them with a tight pink t-shirt that shows off the curve of my breasts. It’s a far cry from my hoodies and yoga pants.

Squeezing Miles’ hand, I breathe through the butterflies doing somersaults in my stomach.

“I can’t change what’s happened. I just need to keep going forward. I need to act like I don’t care.”

Like nothing can hurt me.

I’ve been letting myself get lost in the cracks of my anxiety, and it’s taken a stranger in the dark to make me see that. I like the way I feel about myself when I’m with him. He makes me feel things I’ve never experienced before.

The way he listened to me, *really* listened, made me feel seen. How he touched me like he didn’t want to stop made me feel wanted.

When we make it to the door, my steps falter, my heart speeds up, and there’s a heavy pressure in my chest.

Where’s the girl who walked to a bench in the middle of the night, took off her clothes, and stood there naked so a man in a mask could look his fill at her?

The low husky words whisper through my memory. He left his mark on my neck. A hickey I had to cover with makeup.

Where’s the girl who rode through five orgasms on a stranger’s tongue, then went home and fucked herself to a sixth?

Lifting my head up high, I let his words empower me.

I'm that girl.

Arabella Gray.

No one knows how many times I've sat in my room and cried. How many times I've lost hope. How many times I've thought I might snap with everything I'm carrying around on the inside.

Instead of giving up, I need to let go.

Miles pulls me to a stop outside the doors. "I'm going to be right by your side. We just stick together. We're a power couple just like Ant-man and The Wasp."

His superhero reference makes me smile. "Daredevil and Elektra."

"Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman."

"Thanks for having my back,"

Miles returns my smile. "That's what friends do."

I didn't know he covered for me when I skipped dinner until Lacy asked me how my designing was going. She believed his excuse that I was too wrapped up in what I was doing to eat. After food had arrived last night, much to my surprise, I'd automatically texted him to thank him. It had been a shock to discover it wasn't him.

My dark shadow had come to me in the cemetery. Built me up with his words. Turned me on with his kisses, and then made sure I didn't go hungry.

I can't call him that. What is he, Batman? God, I'm such a dork.

A smile lifts my lips at the thought.

Heads turn our way when Miles and I enter the cafeteria, whispers rippling around us. Tightening his grip on my hand, he squeezes my fingers. His touch feels solid and safe, grounding me that little bit more.

Why do you care what anyone else thinks?

The words keep me walking.

I keep my eyes forward and pretend that Eli Travers does not exist in my world. He's nothing to me. Just another toxic influence I don't need in my life. Trauma I don't need to add to all the others that have shaped me in the last eighteen years.

I step toward an empty table, but Miles tugs me toward the others. When we reach them, they all stop talking.

Evan speaks first. "Your tits look good in that top."

I lift a careless shoulder. "I decided to try something new."

But Evan's attention has moved away from me and he's looking at Miles like he's crazy. "Dude, your girlfriend has kissed two other guys, and you're cool with that?"

"Yeah, how's Eli?" Bret smirks at me. "Locked lips with him recently?"

I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not going to let them punish me for something that wasn't my fault.

Pulling out an empty seat, I drop down into it as Miles sits beside me. "I wouldn't know. We don't talk, and no."

Jace leans over the table. "Why didn't you tell us he was your brother?"

"Stepbrother, and because of a reaction like this." I gesture around the room at the other students still gossiping.

"He grabbed her and kissed her." Miles shifts toward me, his knee brushing the side of my leg under the table. "The whole photo thing shows it was a setup. Do you really think she would be interested in a freak like that?"

"You sound pussywhipped to me." Jace arches an eyebrow, slouching back in his chair. "I don't know. Are you interested in a freak like that, Arabella?"

My new-found confidence wavers at his unfriendly tone. Insecurity and self-deprecation ooze in through the gaps.

"The only guy I'm interested in is Miles." I'm pleased with how much force I put into my words.

Liar, liar, pants on fire. You want to do dark and dirty things with the guy in the tomb. The guy whose name you still don't know.

"I barely know Eli." I wonder how much my roommate has actually told them. "Our parents got married out of the blue, and we didn't know about it until they told us. We're virtually strangers. Most of what I know about him I learned here, from you."

Jace straightens, his gaze remaining steady on my face. "You look pretty friendly in that photograph. I think you enjoyed having Travers' tongue down your throat."

"You sound jealous, Black." Brad laughs.

He's right. I did enjoy the kiss. I just don't want to admit to it ever. I need to forget about it because it's never happening again.

Instead of bowing my head weakly, like I would have in the past, I grit my teeth. "We don't like each other. You'd have to be blind not to see that,

and I'm pretty sure there's nothing wrong with your eyesight, or you wouldn't be on the football team."

Evan whistles. "Is this a monthly mood swing?"

I ignore him, the tension around the table palpable.

Lacy rolls her eyes. "Shut up, Evan."

"From the way Travers is staring at her right now, I'm pretty sure he's trying to burn a hole through her head. Does that scream interest to you? More like I'm going to smother you with a pillow in your sleep." Miles' comments almost makes me turn and look, but I resist.

Eli Travers does not exist. I am not going to feed the monster. I need to concentrate on one thing at a time. I can't get distracted.

"We've all seen the way he treats her," Brad acknowledges.

"And Arabella is nothing like him," Lacy adds. "She's far too nice. She did tell me on the first day she arrived about being his stepsister."

Bret, Jace, and Evan scowl at her, but Brad doesn't look surprised.

"You knew?"

Brad shrugs at Bret's question. "Lacy and I don't have secrets. It's called trust. You should try it sometime ... when you actually find a girl who will date you."

Evan snickers.

Miles squeezes my leg gently under the table. "Are we cool?"

Again, my voice from the dark whispers through my head. *Why do you care what anyone else thinks?*

CHAPTER 98

ELI

I walk to the room housing my sculpture with my cell wedged between my ear and shoulder. My dad is talking about the changes his wife has made to the house. It takes everything inside me not to snarl, and demand to know why he's eradicating the evidence of my mom's existence.

"How's school?" He finally changes the subject. Sadly, it's to one I have just as little interest in discussing.

"Same old." I unlock the door and step inside. My sculpture stands in the center with a sheet thrown over it.

"And Arabella? Is she settling in okay?"

"Doesn't her mother know?"

He sighs down the line. "Don't be like that, Eli."

"She's joined the cheer squad and is friends with the jocks. She even has a boyfriend. Moves fast, just like her mom."

And at night, she sneaks off to the cemetery to perform unholy acts with her stepbrother ... only she doesn't know it's him.

I wonder what my dad would say if I told him that.

I drag the sheet off the marble and step back to study it. My dad is still talking, this time about Thanksgiving plans.

"... so, if you can bring Arabella with you, that'll save Elena an unnecessary trip. She's having a lot of fun with Thanksgiving plans."

"Wait. What? Go back. Bring Arabella with me?"

"She doesn't have a car, Eli. I don't even think she can drive. That's something we can sort out once you're home. We can get her an intensive driving course and have her license before Christmas. A car would be a nice Christmas gift, don't you think?"

"No, I don't. And I doubt she'll want to come home with me."

"What did you do?"

"And there you go assuming I had to do anything."

Oh, you know. I just made her life miserable, tongue-fucked her, then had her jerk me off, and now I just want to bend her over the nearest surface and bury my dick so far inside her, I leave an imprint. And now she's blaming me for the one thing I didn't do.

I pick up a tooth chisel. “I’ve got to go. I need to get to work on this piece for art.”

“You’ll check that Arabella has a ride home?”

“Sure. Speak to you later.” I cut the call before he can ask any more questions.

I navigate to the music app, start a playlist, then set my cell down and get to work.

I’m clearing my tools away when the cell in my bag buzzes. Dusting off my hands, I crouch and pull it out.

Kitten: I did it.

I’ve been trying hard all day not to think about Arabella and her appearance. Those jeans had hugged her ass and the pink shirt had brought out the blue of her eyes. My fingers had itched to touch her hair, run through it, feel its softness, and I’d spent the entire hour at breakfast staring at her.

Me: You did.

Kitten: Can we meet tonight?

Me: Have you forgotten how this works?

But I know I’m going to meet her. I send another text before she replies.

Me: Bench, an hour after curfew. Blindfold. Red or green?

Kitten: Green.

I shove the cell back in my bag and lock up the room. I debate on detouring to the cafeteria for food, but that will mean queuing up and I’m really not in the mood for that, so I go straight to my room.

Miles and Arabella are standing outside his room, with Lacy and Brad, when I step out of the stairwell and their conversation stops when they spot me. I start to walk past them, then stop and turn.

Four pairs of eyes stare at me. Arabella is chewing on her bottom lip, her only outward display of nerves. I want to pull it free, replace her teeth with mine but I keep control over my expression, letting my gaze rove over all of them before settling back on her.

Her shoulders stiffen as she braces herself for whatever I’m about to say. I let a smile curl up one side of my mouth.

“My dad called to say your mom is having a Thanksgiving party. Your attendance is expected. If you need a ride—”

“If you think I’m going to get in a car with you after you dumped me miles away on my first day, you are fucking insane.”

I hike an eyebrow. That’s exactly what I was about to say, but I’m not going to admit it. Instead, I laugh. “Like I’d fucking offer you a place in my car. I was going to say, if you need a ride, I suggest you start looking for someone who lives in the Hamptons and has a dick that needs sucking.”

I turn and stalk away. I should have expected that really, but her rejection still stings.

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CHAPTER 99

ARABELLA

I don't take my eyes off Eli until he vanishes from view. Even then, the conversation we've had leaves me unsettled. There's no way I'm getting in a car with him again. Hell will freeze over first.

Brad gives me a thoughtful look. "Jace could probably give you a lift. He lives near Eli's house. He and Evan usually drive together."

"He does?" I recall his reaction to me this morning and wonder if he would let me ride with them. Do I really want to be stuck in a car for four hours with a couple of jocks, though? They haven't stopped teasing me about the photo of the kiss or the fact Eli is my stepbrother.

It's better than being dumped in the middle of nowhere by Eli. I don't trust him, and I never will.

"I'm going to text him and ask." Brad already has his phone in his hand, typing out a message before I can say a word.

Miles gently touches my arm. "I'd take you, but I'm nowhere near there."

Pushing my worries to the back of my mind, I keep a hold of the new confidence I've felt all day. "It's okay. I needed to start thinking about how I was traveling back anyway. I can get an Uber or something."

How much would that cost?

My stomach plummets at the thought.

Brad glances up from his cell screen, "He said he doesn't mind taking you."

Lacy looks pleased. "Great, then that's all sorted."

I'm not sure it's a good idea, but what other choice do I have? If Elliot asked Eli to bring me back to the house, it means my mother isn't willing to come and get me.

Did I really think things were going to change?

I'm a little later than usual leaving my room. Lacy takes forever to fall asleep, and by the time she's finally snoring, I'm going to be late. I tiptoe out of our room and type a quick message to warn him.

Me: I'm going to be a little late. My roommate has only just fallen asleep.

Unknown number: I'll be waiting.

Walking faster, I hurry along the hallway and keep going until I'm out in the darkness. I pause in the shadows beside the door, and slowly sweep my gaze left and right. I can't afford to be seen.

When I'm satisfied there's no one lurking, I take off across the grass. The trees are dark silhouettes as I approach them. When I reach the start of the path, I slow my pace and head for the cemetery. Excitement grows as the bench comes into view. Smiling to myself, I tug the blindfold out of my pocket and pull it on the second I sit down.

I tuck my hands between my thighs, keep my head up and back straight.

"Good evening, Kitten." A hand lands on my shoulder.

Eyes closed under the blindfold at the raspy whisper, I savor the weight of it. "Good evening ... I don't know what to call you."

He's silent for a beat. "Do I need a name?" He sounds curious.

Yes, yes, something I can call out when I'm touching myself and imagining it's you doing it.

I nod. "Please. Even if it's not your real one."

At this point, I'm not sure I want to know. Out here, it's like a different world. Somewhere Churchill Bradley Academy doesn't exist, and it's just the two of us.

Three of us when he brings his friend.

Heat climbs into my cheeks.

What does he plan to do to me tonight?

A finger drifts over my cheekbone. "Sin. That's what you can call me."

"Sin," I repeat softly, already feeling the wetness of arousal between my legs.

He chuckles. "I think it's appropriate. I'm going to guide you into the tomb, where we can have a little more privacy."

Rising eagerly, I let him take my arm. I trust him to keep me from falling, and I duck my head when he tells me to. The air of the tomb is cool, prickling over my skin.

"Is your friend here tonight?" I whisper when we come to a stop.

"No. He'll come and play with us another time."

I squirm with anticipation. I haven't been able to stop thinking about him all day. Not only does he own my dreams at night, but he's there in my head during my waking hours.

I'm desperate to touch him again. Eager to feel the solid warmth of his cock in my hand. I want to explore it more, discover what he likes, and listen to his groans and gasps. I want the thrill of knowing I'm pleasing him, the way he pleased me when he had his mouth between my legs, making me come over and over.

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CHAPTER 100

ELI

“Thank you for the food last night. It was you, wasn’t it?”

I shrug, then remember she can’t see me. “Having a pity party in the cemetery would make anyone hungry.”

Her head swings toward the direction of my voice, and she lifts a hand. “Can I touch you?”

I circle her wrist with my fingers and flatten her palm against my chest. It immediately slides up to my throat. “Ah-ah, Kitten. Don’t break the rules.”

“The rules?”

“No touching my face.”

“Why not? You touch mine.”

I stroke her cheek. “I know who you are.”

“Maybe I want to know who *you* are.”

My fingers slide into her hair, and I tug her head back so I can lower my face and press my mouth against her ear. “No, you don’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you like the mystery, the intrigue, the *excitement* of looking around during your classes and wondering which person in there is remembering how your pussy tasted on his tongue.”

“Is that what you do?” Her voice is a husky whisper.

“Amongst other things.” I kiss my way down her neck, tugging away her t-shirt so I can suck the soft skin at the base of her throat.

She tilts her head, giving me easier access to her throat. “Why did you pick me?”

My hands find the hem of her shirt and I draw it over her head. She lifts her arms and lets me remove it without argument.

“Because ...” I reach around her to unhook her bra. “... there’s a darkness inside of you which calls to me.”

“That’s not true.”

“No?” I wrap my hands around her waist and lift her onto the coffin. It puts her breasts at the perfect level for my mouth. I run my tongue over a nipple. “Then why are you here?”

She doesn't answer that. Her hands close over my shoulders when I suck her nipple into my mouth, and the moan that escapes *her* mouth turns my dick to stone. I crowd closer, pushing her back until she's lying on top of the coffin, and I'm half sprawled on top of her. My dick is pressing against her pussy, her legs are wrapped around my hips, and I grind against her while I suck, lick, and nip at her breasts.

Her fingers slide into my hair, and I reach up to pull her away. "No touching, Kitten."

"But—"

I nip the soft underside of her breast. "No. Touching."

Kissing a path down her stomach, I pop the button on her jeans. "Lift your ass."

She presses her palms either side of her hips and lifts up so I can pull the denim down, along with the lacy panties beneath, and off her legs.

"Perfect," I whisper and kiss her inner thigh. "I have a dare for you to do tomorrow."

I spread open her pussy with my thumbs and study her. She's wet, glistening. I lick my lips.

"What is it?"

"No bra, all day."

"But I have cheer practice." The word ends on a hiss when my tongue connects with her clit.

"Then be glad I didn't say no panties."

I'd be lying if I didn't say that part of me was getting off on the fact she's spread open, writhing against my mouth, begging for me to let her come when she has no idea I'm the one person in the entire world that she hates. It appeals to the darkness inside me, the warped center that finds her hatred arousing. But another part of me wants to end the charade, to come clean so I can fuck her the way my dick is begging me to do.

But there are lines that I won't cross. I'm happy to lick her, suck her clit, feed her own dark desires with a masked stranger in the dark. I'll make her come for me, *scream* for me. Fuck, at some point, I'm going to have her on her knees with my dick in her mouth. But fucking her? Sticking my dick in her while she has no idea who I am?

That is off-limits.

"Sin. Oh god, *Sin*."

Her fingers clutch at my shoulders, alternating between dragging me closer and attempting to shove me away, and I grab her wrists and pin them down while I continue to assault her clit with my tongue. She writhes, bucks, arches up. She fills the tomb with her whines, moans, and pleas as she rides through her orgasm. And when she's done, her body going limp and boneless, I lift my head and wipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

"I love the sounds you make for me." I press a kiss to her pussy. "I love the way you taste." My tongue teases her clit, and she tries to wriggle away. "I love making you come." My hands hold her thighs apart while I lick a lazy pattern around her. "I could do this all night long." Another long lick lifts her ass off the cold marble, and I chuckle. "But you need to go back to your room before your roommate realizes you're missing."

"But ... you didn't ... you haven't ..." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

"Tomorrow night, I want you on your knees, with your mouth open and your tongue out."

I push a finger inside her. She whimpers.

"I want you naked with your knees spread wide."

A second finger joins the first, and I sweep my thumb in a circle over her clit.

"I want your fingers in your pussy while you worship my dick."

She arches up, pushes against my fingers. I reach up with my other hand to pinch her nipple.

"And when I come, you're going to take it all like the good girl you are ... aren't you?"

Her pussy clenches and soaks my fingers as she comes again.

I press a kiss to her hip. "Such a fucking good girl, Kitten."

CHAPTER 101

ARABELLA

I'm barely aware of what Mr. Drake is reading out. My thoughts are on Sin and what he said last night.

Tomorrow night, I want you on your knees, with your mouth open and your tongue out.

I look around the room.

Is he in here?

Sam, one of the computer geeks, smiles when I meet his gaze.

I want you naked with your knees spread wide.

When my gaze moves on, I catch Jace smirking at me.

I want your fingers in your pussy while you worship my dick.

God, please don't let him be Jace. I tear my eyes away from his face, squirming on my feet, the wetness in my panties distracting. A few of the other guys in the class are also watching me.

And when I come, you're going to take it all like the good girl you are ... aren't you?

My breasts feel heavier, my nipples brushing the material of my white shirt. I know if I look down, I'll see the tight peaks visibly poking through the cotton. I've been simmering with arousal since I left my room this morning, braless like he demanded. It's kept my mind on our game, not the note I found on my desk this morning.

Monster-fucker had been scrawled on it for everyone to see.

Sin is watching me. He said he would, and I don't doubt his words.

I stare down at the page in the book on my desk, but the words swim before my eyes. The anticipation of waiting for tonight is killing me. When I was in the bathroom this morning, I'd sucked two of my fingers, trying to imagine what it would feel like to have his cock in my mouth. I'd swirled my tongue, sucked, and licked to practice.

I don't want to disappoint him. What if I'm no good at it?

Doubt creeps in, but I breathe slowly through the panic.

He'll tell me what to do. He always does.

The sound of the bell jerks me from my thoughts. As everyone leaps up out of their chairs, I rise and gather my books.

“Come on,” Lacy chirps from beside me. “We only have one free period, and I want to go over those moves.”

I resist hunching my shoulders and slip the strap of my bag over my shoulder. No one has really noticed I’m not wearing a bra. I just need to keep pretending it’s a normal day. Keeping my head up high, I follow Lacy out of the class. Mr. Drake stares at my chest as we pass him. His eyes lift to meet mine, and he gives me a knowing smile.

My cheeks heat up and I look away, hurrying out of the class.

The confidence I’ve felt dissolves into awkwardness as I follow Lacy and the other cheerleaders toward the football pitch. We drop our bags beside the bleachers and assemble as a group.

“Okay, everyone,” Lacy calls, stepping to the front. “You know the routine. Brad is going to start the music, and we start from the beginning.”

Brad waves at us from his seat, Jace, Evan, Bret, and a few of the other jocks are with them. Miles isn’t there, but I notice Kellan and Eli lurking at the opposite end of the bleachers to the other boys.

We all line up and the music starts setting us into motion.

Flinging my arms out and shaking my pom poms I try to stay focused on my movements. My breasts jiggle beneath my top as I jump, prance, and wiggle my body in time with the beat. When I swing around to face the bleachers again, my gaze focuses on the students watching us.

Brad is staring at my chest. Evan, Jace, and Bret are soon ogling me as well.

Oh my god. They know I’m not wearing a bra.

My face is hot but a tiny part of me enjoys the attention. I smile widely and let myself sink into the routine until we come to a stop.

“Really? No bra?” Tina pants from beside me.

The intoxicating glow of self-awareness congeals into wariness. “I—”

“Who are you after this time? Brad? Evan?”

I glance around, catching a few of the other cheerleaders giving me withering stares.

Closing in on me, Tina gets right up into my face. “You might have everyone else fooled with the sweet and innocent act, but not us.”

My stomach plummets at her words.

I’m sitting on the bench with the blindfold covering my eyes, my earlier excitement is tainted by Tina’s words. I shouldn’t care what she thinks but a

part of me does. I've lived my whole life wanting people to like me, and that's the one thing I've wanted since I got here.

A hand touches my shoulder making me jump.

"How did you feel without a bra today, knowing everyone noticed?" Sin asks quietly.

Taking a deep breath, I tell him the truth. "Embarrassed, sexy, desirable."

Fingers stroke my hair. "All the boys wanted a taste of you."

I shiver at his words. "Yes."

"Would you have let them if they asked?"

"No." I shake my head.

Only you. There's been no one else. You're my first.

I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from admitting it out loud.

He takes my hand, and I rise confidently from the bench. Like all the times before, I let him guide me into the tomb, excited that we're finally alone. No interruptions, just the two of us in our secret place.

I remain still while he strips me of my clothes. Dizzy with anticipation, I kick off my sneakers. Lifting my feet one at a time, I allow him to remove my yoga pants and panties. Keeping my arms loosely at my sides, I stand tall, knowing he's watching me. I'm not embarrassed. Not anymore. I want him to see me. It's clear from the way he talks to me that he likes what he sees. For the first time in my life I feel sensual and beautiful.

"I'm going to take a photo," he tells me, caressing his warm palms down my arms. "And record a video so you can see how fucking beautiful you look with my dick in your mouth."

"You made a video before when you ..."

"When I ate you out," he finishes for me. "I'll add it to the cloud tonight after we're finished here. On your knees for me, Kitten."

I lower myself to the floor. The stone is cold and solid beneath my legs as I kneel.

"Spread your knees." Sin's voice is husky and thick. "Show me your pussy."

My heart thumps in my chest, and I widen my position, the cool air skating over the sensitive area between my legs. The dull ache in my groin pulses needily, hungry for this man's attention.

"Touch yourself. I want to know how wet you are right now."

I drop my hand between my legs and push two fingers inside myself. They slide in easily, my palm drenched by my slickness.

“Show me.”

My breathing is unsteady when I bring my hand up, knowing he can see the wetness coating my skin. Fingers encircle my wrist, and he raises my arm. Hard, hot flesh greets my touch, and I close my hand around his cock. I don't need much encouragement to stroke his length, coating it with my arousal. He swells harder under my palm, and I giggle in exhilaration.

“You like that you turn me on, Kitten? Hmm.” The pad of a fingertip traces my jaw and then rubs over my lips. “How badly do you want my dick?”

I part my lips and suck the end of his finger eagerly in answer. Pumping his cock with one hand, I flick my tongue over the digit in my mouth.

His grip tightens on my wrist until I let him go. “Fuck. Enough. I need to be inside you.”

Images of me spread out over the coffin with him on top of me, claiming my virginity flash through my head.

My pussy clenches at the fantasy with a need that physically hurts.

“Mouth open,” he growls. “Tongue out.”

I tip my head back and obey. The tip of something smooth and hard meets my tongue, the length of it inches forward, going deeper. Reaching out in front of me blindly, I find his thighs and curl my fingers in the material covering them.

My lips stretch around his cock, and there's a moment of panic. He's too big.

“Relax, Kitten. Breathe.”

I breathe in and out of my nose, and let my throat relax at the daunting sensation.

A hand slides through my hair, fingers tangling in the locks. “Once I start fucking your mouth, I want you to do the same to your pretty pussy with your fingers.”

CHAPTER 102

ELI

My dick hits the back of her throat, and she gags, the nails of one hand digging into my thigh.

“Just relax. Tip your head back a little.” I tug gently on her hair until her head tilts. “Loosen your jaw. Stop clenching. If you bite my dick off, it’s going to be hard to explain.”

Her soft nervous laugh vibrates along my length, but she does as I say. Her jaw slackens, tongue flattening against my dick, and I slide deeper.

She mumbles something, and I stroke her hair. “You’re doing so good, Kitten. If you could see how you look, you’d be proud of yourself. Just a little more to go. I’m going to pull out and then go deep. You can take it for me, can’t you?” I withdraw from her mouth until I’m resting against her lips. “Ready? Take a deep breath, Kitten.”

Moonlight spills into the tomb as the door swings open. I glance up just as Kellan slips through. He closes the door behind him, then turns. He stops, head canting as he takes in the scene, then smiles and moves behind Arabella.

“Do you remember when I told you my friend might join us tonight?”

Her tongue comes out to lick her lips and sweeps across the tip of my dick. I grunt and reach down to curl my fingers around it, giving it one slow pump.

“Words, Kitten.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Good. He’s just arrived. He’s going to make you feel good while you suck my dick. Green or red?”

“Green.” There’s not a second’s hesitation in her response.

Kellan drops to his knees behind her and runs his hands down her arms, then reaches around to cup her breasts. She hisses, her back arching when his fingers find and tweak her nipples.

“Your only focus tonight is to make me come, Kitten. When I come, you can come.” I wonder if she’ll connect what we’re doing with the words in her diary. She described, in vivid detail, how she dreamed of being on her knees, sucking someone’s dick while another person played with her body.

She talked about how dirty it made her feel and questioned if there was something wrong with her for waking up wet and wanting afterward.

I stroke my dick against her lips. "Open wide, Kitten. Your mouth is going to be full, so you won't be able to speak. If you need me to stop, tap my thigh three times. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Show me." Her fingers tap against my thigh lightly. "Good girl." I tighten my grip on her hair, pull her head back, and thrust into her mouth.

Her tongue laps at my length as I slide in and out of her mouth. Her entire body is trembling as Kellan's hands roam over her, stroking and pinching her breasts, dipping down to slip between her thighs and find her clit.

I wish I could see her eyes, hold her gaze while I fuck her mouth. I want to see if the blue deepens to a darker color with her arousal. Are they watering? Is her mascara smeared across her face?

She whimpers around my dick, and I slow my thrusts only for her to dig her nails into my thigh in protest.

"Greedy Kitten." My laugh is ragged, my control unraveling and my thrusts become jerky as my orgasm hits. "Swallow me down." My demand is raspy, delivered seconds before I come.

She clings to me, and I can feel her throat undulating as she swallows everything I give her. My breathing is harsh as I suck in lungful's of air and my hand is shaking when I stroke the top of her head.

"Good girl. Now it's your turn."

I ease my still-hard dick free from her mouth and push her backward. She falls against Kellan, who lowers her to the ground. I don't even give her a chance to get comfortable before I'm between her legs, my tongue on her clit. She's wet, *soaked*, on the edge from Kellan's teasing, and it doesn't take more than a few licks before she's arching her back, and sobbing my name.

Kellan slips away, just as silently as he arrived, when her orgasm hits, leaving us both alone. I know where he's going. He'll be meeting Miles again. It's become a challenge for him to get Arabella's boyfriend to admit he's gay. So far, he insists he isn't and that what he keeps doing with Kellan is not normal for him. Kellan's not convinced. Nor am I. But while my friend keeps the swim captain occupied, it means I can keep Arabella's attention on me.

Kneeling up, I reach out a hand and switch off the flashlight, sending the tomb into darkness, and then stretch out beside Arabella. My fingers trace a light pattern over her skin, and she shivers.

“Take off your blindfold,” I whisper. She can’t see me now, and I want to touch her face.

I stroke a circle around her nipple, feeling it tighten under my touch, while she moves to lift her arms and pull the blindfold off.

I cup her face, turning it toward me so I can lower my head and kiss along her jaw. My tongue flicks out, following the curve of her ear, and I suck the lobe into my mouth.

Her sigh is soft and warm against my cheek.

I want to ask how she feels, whether she enjoyed having my dick in her mouth while Kellan played with her tits. I want to know if it matched the expectations she had in her diary. I want to know if she still feels dirty.

But I stay silent, losing myself in the warmth of her body and the taste of her skin on my tongue, and tell myself none of it matters. She’s still Arabella Gray and I’m the stepbrother she hates.

Her breathing slows, deepens, and her body turns sideways and cuddles into me.

“It’s cold,” she mumbles, her voice on the edge of sleep, and I frown.

Usually, we’ve gone our separate ways minutes after making her come.

Why the fuck are we cuddling? And I haven’t even considered the temperature in the tomb. I’m fully clothed. She’s naked. I push up on one elbow, and reach for her blindfold, settling it back into place.

“Time to go, Kitten.” I pull my hood up, just in case, and push the button on the flashlight. “Get dressed. Wait five minutes, then get back to your room.”

I grab my cell and leave the tomb before she can reply and crouch down behind one of the gravestones and wait for her to leave. Once she slips out and dashes across the cemetery, I lock up the tomb and make my own way back to the dorm building.

Kellan is already in our room when I get there.

“I’ve edited the videos and sent them to you,” he says.

I nod, drop the videos into the cloud, and send Arabella a text to let them know they’re there, along with her next dare.

Me: I saw how Mr. Drake looked at you today. He’s imagining what your tits look like. Poor guy. Give him something to work

with. Flash him during class tomorrow.

Kitten: You want me to show a teacher my breasts?

Me: Tell me you're not wet just thinking about it.

The dare ties in to another page of her diary. Exhibitionism. Nothing too extreme, and only in ways that could be viewed as accidental. I know for a fact there are girls in our year that have done much worse than flash their tits at a teacher, especially Mr. Drake. I'm pretty sure at least three of them have sucked his dick in return for a better grade.

Me: After you've done it, text me and tell me how it felt.

I toss the cell onto the floor beside the bed, and close my eyes, reliving the past few hours in my mind until sleep claims me.

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CHAPTER 103

ARABELLA

Nerves and adrenaline writhing in the pit of my stomach, I watch Mr. Drake at the front of the class. He has his back to us, the marker in his hand scraping across the whiteboard.

Playing with the tiny white buttons of my shirt, I unbutton a few more until the front gapes open, showing the dip between my braless breasts.

Am I really going to do this? Oh god, I feel sick.

Everyone has their head down, copying out the exercise, oblivious to what I'm about to do. My hands tremble, as I push the material wide, on edge at the thought of getting caught.

I glance around.

Please don't look.

I can't do this.

It's insane.

Sin is going to be disappointed if I don't.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I'm about to give in when Mr. Drake turns. I tug the material over my left breast, letting it whisper over my skin, exposing myself for a split second.

For one awful moment, everything seems to slow down. Mr. Drake's gaze lands on my chest. His eyes widen slightly, surprise rippling over his expression before his attention snaps up to my face.

I anchor my focus on the book in front of me with a giddy sense of triumph, while my stomach churns.

I sit still and rigid, waiting for him to call me out. Except it never comes. As if nothing has happened, he continues talking where he left off. When I risk a glance up through my eyelashes, his back is toward me again. I reach for my shirt front and refasten the buttons one at a time.

Relief finally comes when the bell rings, ending the class. I grab Sin's phone from my bag and give him the text he's waiting for.

Me: I flashed Mr. Drake. I feel sick, but I also kind of liked the rush.

"Not wearing a bra again today? I think you gave Mr. Drake a hard-on."

The voice in my ear sends my heart jumping into my mouth while my hand hides my cell screen. I turn my head. Evan is leaning down beside me.

He meets my gaze, and smirks. "He'll be asking you to come for special evening classes before the end of the week."

"Ready to go?" Miles' voice interrupts us.

"Y-yes." My words come out in a shaken stutter.

I ignore Evan as he passes us and shove my books and pens in the bottom of my bag.

He saw me flashing the teacher. Did anyone else see me do it? Is he going to tell his friends?

Threading my fingers through Miles', we walk together toward the door. Mr. Drake smiles when he sees me and winks.

I clutch Miles' hand tighter, and don't let go of it until we reach his locker. While he's busy putting some books away, I check my phone only to find no message and send another.

Me: Evan saw me do it. What if he tells someone?

"Ready to go hang out at the bleachers?" Miles locks his door.

I find his hand again, pocketing my cell. "Don't you get bored of watching the football team practicing?"

He flashes me a smile, his eyes amused. "But you love watching a bunch of guys getting hot and sweaty."

I purse my lips, and smile back, knowing full well he's the one that's interested in watching them play. We walk out of the building, and head for the practice ground. A few other students have taken seats on the bleachers to watch the team go through their paces.

We find a place midway up, away from everyone else. Eli and Kellan pass us as they go higher up in the stands. Unable to help myself, I sneak a glance at the two of them as they sit down.

"Eli is really creeping me out."

Did my stepbrother see me flash my breast at Mr. Drake?

The thought leaves me feeling unsettled and cold.

"Staring at you is better than him bullying you."

"I'm not so sure." I face forward. "Maybe he's trying psychological warfare?"

"You mean he's trying to melt your brain from the inside or stop your heart from beating in your chest?"

“I *mean* trying to assert dominance by not breaking eye contact. That’s what animals do, right?”

“You mean like a wolf? Just be happy he’s backed off.”

I bump my shoulder into his. “I am.”

Miles’ attention returns to my face, and he smiles. “Then don’t let some stalkerish glaring bother you. The big bad wolf isn’t going to eat you.”

Warmth spread through my cheeks as I recall the way Sin’s cock had thrust into my mouth. The way his friend had tormented my breasts until I came. Then afterward, when I’d been snuggled against Sin’s chest, feeling protected and special.

Pressing my thighs together, I try to ignore the sweet lingering ache.

I crave the dark. The hour after curfew when no one is around, and I can go to him. I’m addicted to his touch, his praise, and how he brings my body to life. The little desires and urges that have been growing over the weeks have turned into full-blown fantasies. Ones, I hope Sin will entertain.

Would he take my virginity if I asked him?

The question makes me hot all over.

I can’t. Everyone thinks I’m dating Miles and that we’re having sex. If the truth gets out, we’ll both look stupid, and I don’t want him to get hurt.

“I was thinking ... if you haven’t found your bracelet by Thanksgiving, maybe we could get you a new one?”

The shift in conversation catches me off guard for a second. “Amanda made it for me. It wouldn’t be the same.”

His eyes meet mine. “Maybe she can make you a new one?”

“I haven’t talked to her in weeks.” I follow the place where the cord had once been with one finger. Our texts have slowed to a stop.

She’s forgotten about you.

“Call her over Thanksgiving,” Miles suggests.

I change the subject. “Are you going to see Enrico when you get home?”

His expression darkens. “No.”

“Is he away visiting family?”

“We broke up.”

Finding his hand, I give it a squeeze. “When?”

“The weekend before Halloween.” He toys with my fingers, stroking his own over mine.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It hurt.” His voice is no more than a whisper. “And then I just didn’t want to think about it, so I pretended it never happened.”

I rest my cheek on his shoulder. “I wish you had said something.”

He drops a kiss on the top of my head. “I’m okay. I’ve been finding things to distract me.”

I’m about to reply when Miles flinches.

“What the fuck?”

Straightening up at his angry words, I’m in time to see something white hit the back of his head. It bounces to the floor behind us. I twist just as Kellan smirks and tosses another scrunched up piece of paper at my friend.

I send him a glare. “He’s such a dick.”

Miles’ cheeks go red, and he keeps his head down. “Just ignore him.”

A third one makes impact with the back of his neck.

My temper rises, and I turn in my seat. “Stop it!”

Kellan slouches back in his seat and tips his head to the side. “Hey, pretty boy. Stop ignoring me.”

“Fuck off, Fraser,” Miles snaps, still facing forward.

My gaze shifts to Eli.

He’s staring at me, and the hair on the back of my neck rises. I hold eye contact, Sin’s words in my head. I won’t back down. I’m not going to show weakness.

I am not weak. I’m strong. I’ve done things that the old Arabella Gray would never have done. I won’t let him intimidate me anymore.

Seconds pass, and we continue to stare at each other, caught in a silent battle of wills.

His attention flicks to my mouth and holds.

My lips tingle and part with awareness.

Tongue darting out, Eli licks his lips, playing with his lip ring, and then he smiles.

My entire body flushes with heat, my pulse picking up to a faster beat. Everything inside me recoils in shock, and I turn away, breaking the connection.

I did not just get turned on by my stepbrother licking his lips.

“I think I’m going to head back to my dorm,” Miles says.

I rise from my seat. “I’m coming too.”

CHAPTER 104

ELI

With the sound of ‘Where were you’ by Girlfriends in my ears, I step back and look at the sculpture in front of me. It’s coming together nicely. Parts of it are recognizable—arms wrapped around a torso, wings arching up. I can see it finished in my mind’s eye, although there’s a long way to go for the actual real piece of marble.

I stretch my neck from side to side, trying to ease the ache from keeping it in one position for so long while I worked on a particular part. My cell chimes, and I drop down into a crouch to retrieve it from my bag.

The message waiting for me tugs my lips up. It’s a photograph from Arabella. She’s snapped a shot of herself in the shower. The water is running down her body and she has one hand covering her breast. There’s absolutely nothing on show, but it makes my dick hard anyway. I laugh softly. She’s becoming bolder, not waiting for me to request photographs before sending them.

It’s been five days since we were last together, when she’d sucked my dick and I’d almost lost my mind from the pleasure of it. But with the Thanksgiving holiday coming up, and everyone going home for a week, I’ve had to focus on my art project. By the time the regular school day is over, I’ve been going straight to my sculpture where I spend the evening working, leaving me exhausted and aching. I’ve been in no condition to play games with Arabella without giving away who I was, so instead, I sent her dares and demands—all of which she followed.

Me: Tease.

She replies with another photograph. A side view of the curve of her ass, and the barest hint of a nipple. I lick my lips. Could I get away early and see her tonight?

Me: Show me more.

Kitten: Meet me tonight and I’ll do more than show you.

Me: What will you do?

Kitten: Anything you want.

I groan, running a hand down my face.

Me: Your boyfriend not satisfying you?

I don't know why I send that. Actually, I do. I just don't want to acknowledge what's driving me. I hate the thought of Miles touching her, of doing the things I've done to her. Of doing *more*.

Kitten: Not the way you do.

Jealousy flares. Why the fuck is she still with him if she likes what I do so much?

Me: Sorry, Kitten. You're just going to have to make do tonight. I have a prior commitment.

It's not really a lie. Kellan has been complaining about how little time I've spent with him over the last week, so I agreed to finish early and hang with him tonight. But even while I clean up and head back to the dorm, my mind is trying to figure out a way to escape and meet with my unexpected obsession.

Kellan is pacing the room when I finally open the door.

"You're late." He throws a towel and clean clothes at me. "Shower, fast. We have to leave in ten minutes."

I catch everything automatically, and frown at him. "Did I miss something? Leave for where?"

"School pass for an outing to the movies. You're driving. I'll buy the popcorn. You're welcome." He shoves me toward the bathroom. "Hurry up."

I shower in record time, with Kellan shouting countdown updates through the door, and he hustles me out of the room and down the hallway while I'm still pulling on my t-shirt.

"Fuck's sake, what's the hurry?"

He flashes me a grin, but doesn't answer. "Hoodie." He tosses it to me and I pull it over my head. "Keys." They sail through the air just as my head pokes through the top and I scramble to catch them.

Other students are climbing into cars when we get to the parking lot, and we weave through them to where I'm parked at the very end. The lights on my Bugatti flash when I unlock it and we get in.

"Do I at least get to pick the movie?" I ask, firing up the engine.

Kellan snorts. "Fuck, no."

I scowl but drive off the school grounds without arguing.

The movie theater is just outside of town, and when we finally pull in, the parking lot outside is almost full. We climb out and walk inside.

“What are we seeing?” I lean against the wall while Kellan buys popcorn and drinks.

He flashes me a grin. “Who cares.” He nods to my left, and I swing my head just in time to see Miles and Arabella disappearing through a door. “I bought two tickets, one on either side of them, so keep your head down.”

“You came to fuck with Miles?”

“No, darling.” He hands me a tub of popcorn and pats my cheek. “I came to *fuck* Miles. And you’ve been growling like a fucking tiger the last few days, so I thought an hour in the dark with your favorite toy might ease your temper. So, take your drink and your snack and go to your seat.” He tucks a ticket between the fingers holding the popcorn. “Row seventeen, seat four. I won’t be far away. Same row, but seat seven ... next to Miles.”

“You’re putting way too much effort into this, you know,” I complain but fall into step behind him as he walks to the auditorium.

The lights are already down when we enter, and the theater is only half-full. The row we’re on only has two people seated on it and Kellan makes lots of noise as he asks Arabella to stand and let him pass. I hang back, so it doesn’t look like we’re together and wait until Kellan is seated and comfortable before moving down the aisle and taking the seat beside Arabella. She doesn’t pay any attention, her eyes on the screen.

I set the popcorn by my feet and take a quick look at the credits rolling. We’ve arrived just as the movie is starting. I think it’s a new horror, and I wonder if Miles chose it on purpose as a tactic to get Arabella close to him.

I stretch my legs out in front of me and slowly inch sideways so I can lean my head close to Arabella’s.

“Hello, Kitten.”

She throws her head up, the popcorn in her lap spilling over the sides of the bucket. Miles grumbles from the other side of her.

“Keep facing the screen,” I whisper. “Put something over your legs.”

She leans forward and places the popcorn down, then pulls off her hoodie so she can drape it over her thighs.

“Good girl.”

I don’t move until the opening sequence has played out. I can *almost* taste her nerves as she sits and wonders where I came from, what I’m planning to do. And then Miles stands up.

“I need the bathroom,” he whispers to Arabella, and she nods.

Instead of trying to squeeze past her, he turns the other way and brushes past Kellan, who rises to his feet half a beat later and follows him.

I reach across the seat and slide my hand beneath her hoodie. My fingers stroke over her thigh and up over her stomach, following the waistband of her pants. When my fingers touch her skin, she sucks in a breath.

“Green or red?”

“Green.”

My fingers slip beneath the material of her pants and down to her pussy.

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CHAPTER 105

ARABELLA

All I have to do is turn my head, and I'll see his face. I'm tempted, but I keep staring forward. He's trusting me not to look and I won't break that trust.

What is he doing here? Anyone can see us. Miles could return at any moment.

The possibility of getting caught has a strange mix of anticipation and panic holding me suspended in my chair. The images flickering up on the screen blur before my eyes. I haven't seen Sin in five whole days, and now we're in public. He told me he was busy tonight, which had made me pout.

You're not here with him. You're with Miles.

The little voice in my head reminds me, but I ignore it.

We're not in the safe cocooning dark of the tomb anymore. This is the real world, and we aren't alone.

Why the sudden change? What has made him approach me outside of our usual way? I'm not sure if I should be happy or scared.

A hand slides over my thigh beneath my hoodie. Trying not to squirm, I feel it crawl up my stomach and then trail toward the waistband of my pants.

"Green or red?"

"Green." The word leaves me without a single hint of hesitation.

Sin's warm, seeking hand slips beneath the waistband of my pants and finds my pussy. I bite my lip to stop myself from moaning out loud, aware of the people around us. His fingers stroke through my wetness and spread me wide. The first slow circle of my clit has pleasure fogging my brain.

"You're shaking." He pushes a finger inside me. "Have you missed my touch, Kitten?"

Gripping the armrest of my chair, I close my eyes, my attention centered below my waist. Every thrust of his finger only heightens my arousal. The pad of his thumb strokes over my clit, and a strangled half-moan escapes me.

Someone in the row behind us shushes me in the darkness.

“Shh,” His breath skates over my cheek. “Do you want everyone in the movie theater to know I’m getting you off?”

Everyone is watching us. Everyone knows what he’s doing to me. All the naughty things he’s done to me since I met him.

Teeth nip at my earlobe.

Sin chuckles. “Oh, Kitten, that just made you a lot wetter. My good girl likes to do dirty things in public.”

Yes, yes, I do but only with you.

Pushing my hips forward, I unashamedly grind on his hand, fucking his finger.

The movie plays on, the people around us oblivious to what’s happening in row seventeen.

He adds another finger, thrusting deep, and I whimper in response. “Do you get hot at the knowledge that I’m going to make you come while your boyfriend is in the restroom?”

“Yes,” I grunt, hips rising as a third finger joins the rest.

“What would he think of you if he could see you now?” He flicks my clit.

I don’t fucking care.

The pleasure inside me breaks, and I shudder violently with the force of my orgasm. Relaxing back into my seat, my eyes drift half-closed in bliss. Sin’s fingers ease out from between my legs, but before he can remove them completely, I burrow my hand under my hoodie. I thread my fingers through his, to press our palms together. It’s wet from touching me, but I don’t care.

I’m sitting in the dark, holding hands with Sin, and I’m frightened the second I let him go, he’ll vanish into thin air. Five days without him, and I’m desperate for his attention. Not just for the things he does to me but to have him close enough to touch, to talk to. To know that he’s real. As crazy as it sounds, I feel safe when he’s with me.

His fingers flex in my hold, but he doesn’t pull away as I fear. I rub circles on his skin with my thumb, and keep my gaze fixed on the movie as my heart swells with happiness in my chest.

CHAPTER 106

ELI

Miles returns to his seat a little while later, but she doesn't loosen her grip on my hand. There's no sign of Kellan, so I untangle my fingers from hers, and slip away. Kellan is leaning against my car when I exit the movie theater. He straightens when he sees me.

"Get what you want?" I query, unlocking the car.

"He's the most stubborn fucker ever," Kellan grumbles as he drops into the passenger seat. "He'll suck my dick. He'll drop his pants and let me jerk him off, but he won't let my dick near his ass."

"Maybe he thinks he'll catch something."

"The only thing he's catching is feelings. He adores me."

"Of course, he does. That's why he's hiding the fact he's hooking up with you, and still has a girlfriend."

"A girlfriend who's sneaking out at night to let her secret lover and his friend play with her body."

"You're just a prop. She gets just as wet for me if we're alone. You don't need to be there."

"Is that jealousy in your voice, Eli? I am not hot for your little pussy cat."

"No, it's not jealousy and I know you're not. If I thought you wanted her for yourself, I wouldn't let you join in. She wrote about having the attention of two men focused on her and you're the only one I'd trust with that."

"You mean I'm the only friend you have."

I shrug and reverse the car out of the parking lot. "Same thing."

"Why are you so intent on fulfilling all those dirty little fantasies she wrote about, anyway? And don't feed me any more bullshit on how it's to teach her a lesson or prove she's just like her mom. She clearly isn't, and the only lesson you seem to be teaching her is how much pleasure she can get from her body."

"I taught her how to suck my dick as well. Don't forget that."

"No, that was definitely a valuable lesson. Doesn't answer my question though."

I don't answer him until we're driving through the grounds of Churchill Bradley.

“She’s stronger than I expected. I like playing with her.” I glance over at him. “Not toying with her but playing. She committed to the game and makes her own moves in response to mine.”

“She challenges you?”

“She torments me,” I admit in a driven undertone. “It’s not enough to make her come for me in the dark. I want to crawl inside her head and find out everything about her. I want to reach out for her during the day and claim her.” My laugh is bitter. “Could you imagine? She fucking hates the sight of me.” I slice another look at him. “I *know*, before you say it. I know it’s my fault. I started this, and I need to figure out a way to end it.”

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CHAPTER 107

ARABELLA

It's been another five days since Sin turned up at the movie theater and made me orgasm in the dark. He's still sending dares, but it feels like something has shifted between us again. It's as though he's pulling away from me, and I don't like it.

I check my phone, but there's no response to my last text.

Just as ordered, I'd excused myself in the middle of class to go and play with myself in the girls' restroom until I came.

I wonder what he'll make of the video. I recorded myself in the locked stall, my greedy fingers in my pussy, and his name on my lips. He never asked me for it, but I wanted to tease him like I'd been doing all week. Photo after photo of me in different naked poses.

Is he getting bored of me?

The thought leaves me dizzy with panic. Fingers flying over the cell of the screen, I send another message.

Me: I miss you.

God, I sound desperate and pathetic.

We're a week away from the Thanksgiving break, and the thought of being around Eli and my mother so much leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. She'll expect us to play happy families. Live a pretty little lie.

Why should I pretend to make her happy?

I don't want to go.

I drop the phone into my bag and grab the book I'm looking for. Evan is talking to Tina next to her locker further down the busy hallway, as everyone heads to the cafeteria for lunch.

The second our eyes lock, she pushes away from him and marches right up to me.

"I hear your mom is a drunk and a drug addict who can't keep her legs together. Did she fuck Travers' dad into putting a ring on her finger? Is that what you're planning to do, too?"

Her nasty words are so close to what Eli has thrown at me from day one that all I feel is white-hot rage.

You will never be anything more than the daughter of a gold-digger. You're nothing to me, understand? I won't rest until you're gone. You'll either leave willingly by car or in a box, I don't care which. Frightened Miles will dump you now, knowing you're kissing other guys behind his back? It has to make him wonder if you're spreading your legs for them too.

My palm stings, and it takes a second to register the visible red mark of my handprint on Tina's cheek.

Stunned, I stand frozen at what I've just done. "I-I'm sorry."

Eyes wide, her hand comes up to touch the place where I slapped her. "You bitch!"

The expression on her face changes, contorting into rage. I step back, and she lunges at me, her hand lashing out.

Pain detonates across my cheek, the force hard enough to send me backward. Both her hands come toward me, but I raise my own to block them. Her sharp nails claw down my forearms. The pain feeds my anger, and I shove her back. Left arm swinging around, I catch her on the side of the head. Crying out, she stumbles backward, only to be caught in Evan's arms.

People are gathered around us, phones out and aimed in our direction.

Embarrassment and humiliation collide inside me, and I spin away, pushing through the crowd. I rush from the building and keep on going until I'm across the grass and inside the dorm.

The second I'm in my room, I text Miles.

Me: Something happened with Tina, and I need to talk. Can you come to my dorm? I don't want to go to the cafeteria.

I leave my phone on the bed and check my throbbing forearms. Scratches litter the skin, red, raised, and angry. I hiss when I touch the ones on my right arm and go into the bathroom to find something to clean them with.

The screen of my cell is lit up with a message when I return to the bedroom. I pick it up.

Miles: Sorry, Bella, I'm busy right now.

My shoulders sag. He's been busy a lot lately, and although he says it's something to do with his art project, I'm not so sure.

Me: Okay.

Miles: Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not that bad. Make sure you eat lunch. See you in class.

My stomach roils with nerves at the idea of going to the cafeteria alone. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I reach for my sketchbook instead. I flip the pages, until I find the design I've been creating for my art project.

The princess ball gown I originally planned is now something dark and decadent. Where the material was once white and pure, it's now black but no less beautiful. I'm tempted to go down to the room I'm sharing with a few other girls and get back to work on it, but I'm not in the mood to be teased and taunted again.

By the time lunch break ends and it's time for class, I feel a little less on edge. I hurry back to the main building, and Lacy and Linda intercept me by the lockers. They catch me by the arms and drag me into the girl's restroom.

"What the fuck, Arabella?" Lacy snaps the second the door closes behind us.

Insecurities ooze up at the anger in her voice. "I didn't mean to slap her."

"It sure looked like you meant it." She shoves her phone in front of my face and she shows me a video that's been uploaded onto social media.

I swallow hard and bow my head. "She said something nasty, and it made me angry."

She huffs. "Maybe you need to see a therapist for your anger issues. This doesn't make the cheer squad look good. We have an image to uphold. You are not going to ruin that."

"I'm sorry."

"Get your shit together over Thanksgiving." She turns on her heels and walks out of the restroom.

Linda sweeps her gaze up and down me. "I don't even know why Lacy is being nice to you. At least Zoey was one of us."

With that, she leaves me staring after her, tears in my eyes. I release an unsteady breath, and rub my wrist, but my bracelet isn't there.

Because you lost it somewhere and still haven't found it.

It's probably lost forever.

Forgotten, because isn't that what always happens to me?

The second bell sounds, and I open the door to the restroom with a shaking hand. Everyone stares at me when I enter the classroom, a few of the other students breaking into whispers. Miles doesn't even look up from his book. I pass the tables and sit down at my desk. Loneliness makes my throat ache.

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CHAPTER 108

ELI

I watch the video of the catfight between Arabella and Tina more than once. It's been posted all over the school's social media app. Different versions from different angles. It's hard to miss the malice on Tina's face and it's easy to see, to me at least, that the girl had marched over to Arabella with the intent to cause harm. If Arabella hadn't made the first move, Tina would have. That fight was planned. It was going to happen, no matter what Arabella did.

When she walks into the classroom, shoulders hunched and her head ducked down, it takes every single ounce of willpower I own not to say something, but I force myself to stay relaxed in my seat and watch her out of the corner of my eye. This is the girl who first arrived at school, a target for my anger and hatred. It's not the one who has slowly shown herself over the last couple of weeks. The butterfly who climbed out of the chrysalis has had her wings broken. Not one of her so-called friends has her back. It's written all over her face. Not even her boyfriend. In fact, his complete disinterest is clear.

I shove to my feet.

"Mr. Travers?" Mr. Bellamy's questioning tone breaks the silence.

"Bathroom," I mutter and weave between the desks toward the door. He doesn't stop me.

Once I'm in the hallway, I pull my cell out, log into the anonymous account Kellan set up for our use, and upload a video to the social media account, tagging the entire senior year. It's a recording I've been saving for the perfect opportunity, and this feels right.

It's a video of a party from a few months before senior year started. A party at the Country Club in the Hamptons where all the rich families mingle. Tina had been there, and I'd been taking a walk through the grounds to escape the noise and pointless conversations. I walked around a corner and found her in a lip lock with a local girl. She had one hand in the other girl's blouse and another up her skirt.

I walk to the restroom, spend a couple of minutes inside, then return to the classroom ... and walk into chaos.

Tina is screaming at Lacy and Lacy is waving her cell. The rest of the cheer squad, aside from Arabella, are crowding around, while the football and swim team all watch their phones with rapt expressions. I flop down into my seat.

“What did I miss?”

Kellan’s lip curls. “Seems *someone* caught Tina doing something wicked with a female Country Club staff member.”

“Huh ... shocking.”

“The timing is more shocking than the video.” He smirks at me.

“What’s that phrase? People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones?” While everyone is focused on Tina, I pull out my second cell.

Me: Hold your fucking head up.

With everyone’s eyes on their phones, she’ll have no idea who sent it. And, sure enough, her head snaps up and she looks around the second she reads it.

Kitten: Did you post that video?

Me: Everyone has secrets they don’t want people to find out. The trick is knowing how to use them to your advantage. She is not better than you, stop acting like she is.

I slip the cell back into my bag and pull the textbook closer, propping my head on a hand and turning so that my back is to the room, while Mr. Bellamy shouts for everyone to put down their phones and focus on the class. Eventually, everyone settles back down, and the class continues.

“Do you want to grab takeout from the cafeteria and sit on the bleachers for dinner?” Kellan asks when the class is finally over, and we head down the hallway to grab food.

“You mean you want to follow Miles.”

“He gets squirmy. It’s fun to watch.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Fine. Whatever. How is your quest to fuck him going?”

Kellan gives a dramatic sigh. “He’s resistant. Apparently, sucking dick isn’t cheating on his girlfriend but having sex is crossing the line.” We move to the line, and he picks up a tray. “I mean, I can’t complain. He’s *really* good at sucking dick.”

“Are you going to see him over Thanksgiving?”

Kellan shook his head. “Doubt it. He’s going to Minnesota with family.”

“What are you doing?”

He places two sandwiches and fruit juice onto the tray. “Not sure. Aunt Susannah has invited me to go there, but I’m not sure I want to spend Thanksgiving in Texas. They just want to keep me sweet anyway. Poor little orphan Kellan who has all the money ... gotta make sure he remembers all the ones who opened their doors to him, you know?”

“You could come back to my place. Dad won’t mind. You get on with him better than I do, anyway.”

“What about your new mommy?”

My lip curls. I might have decided that Arabella wasn’t a gold-digger, but I sure as fuck haven’t changed my mind about her mother. “Don’t give a fuck what she thinks. I’ll call Dad and let him know you’re coming back with me.”

CHAPTER 109

ARABELLA

Sin: You know the drill, Kitten. Come tonight. Red or green?

Warmth spreads through my chest at the message.

Me: Green.

After I sent him my reply, I look up just as Miles turns toward me. Lacy and the others are at their usual table, but he doesn't even spare them a glance.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing." I hide my cell in my bag and leave it at my feet.

"I got you mac and cheese." He places one of the plates in front of me. "And a Hershey bar."

"Thanks." Attention dropping to the table, I open my drink.

Miles hovers beside the empty chair next to mine. "Please don't be angry with me."

"I'm not." I take a sip.

"Yes, you are." Finally sitting, he takes his plate off the tray. "I'm the worst boyfriend ever. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you earlier. I'm sure Tina did it on purpose."

"I think she wants me off the cheer squad."

"Probably."

I twirl the fork through my food. "I thought you'd be over there with the popular kids."

He nudges my shoulder gently with his. "You're my friend. It would take more than a catfight for that to change. Besides, Tina is now the center of attention. I wonder who sent that video."

My guardian angel. The one who I let do bad things to me when everyone else is asleep.

Lacy's shrill laughter breaks over the murmurs in the room.

I glance around. There's no sign of Tina. Jace gives me a grin and Evan waves.

"Bret took her food," Miles tells me. "The royal bitch is sulking."

I eat in silence while he continues to chat. It's enough of a distraction that I actually clear my plate. We don't linger when we're finished, leaving our

empty plates on the table, and head outside.

“Let’s go for a walk.” He grabs my hand and tugs me across the grass.

For a second, I think he’s going to take us along the path toward the cemetery but instead, we move along the edge of the tree line where the light from the buildings meets the blackness. A few other students are milling around, but they aren’t anywhere near us.

“I have something to tell you.” Miles takes a deep breath and lets go of my hand. “I’ve kind of met someone.”

I halt in surprise. “Here at school?”

“No, no, no.” His cheeks turn red. “But he’s local.”

“Are you friends?”

“God, no. He drives me crazy.”

I cross my arms, casting a nervous glance back at the building. “Does he know you’re fake-dating me?”

He nods, dragging a hand through his hair. “He knows we’re dating.”

“This is what’s been keeping you distracted?”

“Yes.” Miles takes a shaky breath. “He’s ... different.”

The knowledge eases some of the tension in my muscles, and his obvious excitement makes me smile. “And you like him?”

“I really do.”

“Are you going to tell him about our arrangement?”

He shrugs. “I can’t.”

“We aren’t really together though, are we?”

“And if he tells someone, everyone will know we’ve been lying. I’m not sure I can trust him with that information. I just wanted you to know I wasn’t ignoring you on purpose.”

Guilt slithers up inside me.

Miles is willing to keep our secret, and yet I’ve been with someone else.

Sin won’t betray me, though. He won’t tell anyone what we’ve been doing.

Excitement at being in Sin’s presence erases the guilt from earlier. The second he takes my hand and leads me into the tomb, electricity zips through me. He lifts me to sit on the coffin. Legs dangling over the edge of the stone, I wait eagerly for his instructions. The tension between us is tangible and I savor the thrill.

“You are not the sad, empty girl you were when you arrived. Don’t let them steal your confidence.” There’s a hint of anger in his words. “You are stronger than that, Kitten.”

“I’m trying,” I whisper, hating the uncertainty in my tone.

“Tina is a bitch, and you need to stay away from her.”

I shiver at the cold edge in his voice. “Where did you get the video of her from?”

“I have connections.”

Even though I can’t see him, I tilt my head in his direction. “Do you know everyone’s secrets?”

“I know enough to make people uncomfortable.”

I can hear the smile in his raspy whisper. “Do you know mine?”

He answers my question with another one. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” My reply comes without hesitation.

A hand lands on my knee. “You’re not like those airheads you hang out with, and your boyfriend doesn’t deserve you.”

My heart does a weird flip-flop in my chest, sending hot little shocks down my spine. “Are you jealous?”

“I think we both know who owns you, Kitten, and it sure as fuck isn’t him.”

Inching my hand toward his on impulse, I hook my fingers over it. “I’m yours.”

I ache for you.

“I want anything you’re willing to give me. I’ll do anything you want.”

CHAPTER 110

ELI

A couple of months ago, those words would have given me license to really fuck with her. Now the desperation in her voice has me clenching my jaw to stop myself from grinding my teeth.

“Anything?”

Her fingers tighten on mine, and she slides off the coffin to lean against me.

“Tell me what you want. Do you want me on my knees?” She drops to the ground and tips her head back.

“Stand up, Kitten.”

There’s a recklessness about her tonight, and I know it’s because of what happened today.

“Tell me what to do, Sin,” she pleads.

“I did. *Stand up.*” Pulling her to her feet, I cup her face between my palms. “What are you doing?”

“I’m ready to go further. I want more.”

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes.” She reaches out with her hands, and I evade her touch, taking a step back.

“In the middle of a cemetery, on the dirty ground?”

“Anywhere.”

“No.”

“But—”

“I said *no*. I told you that you’re not like them. You’re worth more than a quick fuck in the dark.”

“You don’t want me.” Her voice trembles.

“That isn’t what I said.”

“But it’s what you mean. You’ve barely spoken to me for the past week. No matter what I did, what I sent to you, you wouldn’t meet me.”

“Kitten—”

“What did I do wrong?” She’s not listening to me, her voice rising. “Why don’t you want me anymore? Am I boring you?”

“*Arabella!*” I snap her name, forgetting to keep my voice pitched low. I’ve been careful to avoid using her name, to always keep my voice at a whisper.

Fuck. Did she recognize me?

I catch her hands in mine and soften my voice. “It’s been a long day. You’re not thinking clearly. Go to bed. Sleep. I’ll see you before the school closes for Thanksgiving.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond, releasing her hands and walking out.

I don’t go straight back to my room. I wait for her to leave, which she does a few minutes later, running across the cemetery. If she had stopped for half a second, she would have seen me standing nearby, but her eyes are down, and the moonlight shows me the tears on her face.

Once she’s gone, I go back inside the tomb and slide down to sit with my head back against the coffin.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I say the words out loud. “You had the perfect opportunity to come clean. Why didn’t you take it?”

But I know the answer to that and, idiot that I am, I’m not ready to let go of her just yet.

Shoving to my feet, I go back outside, lock up and take the secret tunnel back to the dorm building. Kellan is asleep when I slip through the door, his body a barely visible shape beneath the sheets. I strip off and crawl into my bed. Sleep is slow to come, but eventually, I drift off.

I don’t text Arabella that morning with a dare. The night before has left a bad taste in my mouth, and I spent half the night tossing and turning, wondering whether she’s gone to Miles.

Did they have sex? Did she give him everything she’d been offering me?

I’m out of sorts and irritable when I arrive at the first class of the day, so of course, it’s the day the asshole football team decides they want to fuck with me.

Jace and Evan stand in the middle of the room, blocking my path to my usual seat. They’re wearing matching grins as I approach them.

“Hey, Travers, I was wondering,” Jace’s grin stretches wide. “When you stuck your tongue down your sister’s throat, did you get a boner?”

I don’t answer him and turn my head to Evan, hiking an eyebrow. He shrugs, his expression sheepish.

“Jealous that she’d rather kiss me than you, Black?”

Jace's smile drops. "So, you did kiss her on purpose?"

I yawn. "Don't most people kiss on purpose? Or have all your kisses been accidental? Can't say that would surprise me." I wave a hand in front of my face. "That breath of yours must be off putting."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I lean closer, until our faces are inches apart. "It means that you stink of the bullshit you spew." I pat his cheek. "Now, are you going to move, or do I have to hurt you?"

He lifts his chin and I roll my eyes. "It's never the fucking easy option with you, is it?"

I feint a punch toward his face and when he moves to block it, I bury my left fist into his stomach. He doubles over. I grab his hair and slam his nose into my knee, then shove him across the nearest table.

"When are you going to fucking learn?" Pushing past Evan, I take my seat seconds before the teacher arrives.

CHAPTER 111

ARABELLA

“Hey, Travers, I was wondering. When you stuck your tongue down your sister’s throat, did you get a boner?”

I flinch at the sound of Jace’s voice, loud across the classroom, and keep my head down.

My eyes are heavy from lack of sleep, and a tension migraine throbs through my skull.

“Jealous that she’d rather kiss me than you, Black?” Eli replies.

Something nudges at the back of my mind but I’m in too much pain to catch it. I hunch my shoulders and wish for the ground to swallow me up. I close my eyes against the chime of my phone. It will be another flood of notifications flashing up. This morning I’d crawled out of bed to another wave of tags about the kiss with Eli, and the fight with Tina.

My head is a mess of emotions.

I offered myself up to Sin last night, and he walked away. Rejection cut deep, leaving me in a pit of misery.

Why doesn’t he want me? I’ve done everything he asked. Everything he wanted.

Everything is in chaos. Everyone is staring at me again and I hate it.

“Miss Gray, you look very pale. Are you feeling well?”

Startled to hear my name, I raise my chin to find the teacher is in the class. I hadn’t even noticed her entering.

“No, Miss. Winters. I feel sick.” My throat is thick with emotion and sounds funny to my own ears.

“Take yourself off to the nurse. You can catch up on someone else’s notes.”

I sway with the pain in my head and gather my things. I just want to get out of the room. Go somewhere I can be alone and breathe.

“Mr. Fraser, instead of playing with your phone, please escort Miss Gray. She looks ready to collapse.”

My shoulders stiffen at her words.

Kellan sighs. “Yes, Miss. Winters.”

I weave slowly past the desks and out into the hallway. Kellan appears from behind me and falls into step. His hands are shoved in his pockets. He doesn't appear to be happy with the situation, and he doesn't say a word as we walk. I feel just as uncomfortable having my nemesis's henchman as my escort. If I didn't feel so bad, I would have told him to go back to class.

At least Miss. Winters didn't send Eli with me. That would have been dangerous, and I can't deal with all his shit right now.

I wish Miles were here instead.

"I bet you're annoyed she didn't pick your boyfriend," Kellan says, mirroring my thoughts. "I'm sure he'd be carrying your bag for you."

The pulsing in the side of my head gets worse. I grit my teeth against the pain and ignore him.

"You really don't look good." Kellan's eyebrows pinch together, and he stares at me intently. "Are you going to puke? Because we've just walked past the restrooms. I don't want you vomiting over my new sneakers."

My eyes tear up again, and I rip my gaze from his. "Migraine."

"Do you get them a lot?"

"N-no." The tears roll down my cheeks, and my bottom lip starts to tremble. "S-sorry. It hurts."

Kellan swears under his breath, and he grabs my arm. Lost in my unhappiness, I follow docilely.

Arms wrap around me, and I'm hauled into a rock-hard chest. Face burrowed against it, I clutch at his t-shirt and sob. Everything I've been bottling up comes pouring out. I hold nothing back. For a small eternity, the warmth and comfort I've been longing for to keep me safe envelops me. I cling to it, letting my tears fall until my throat is raw and I feel empty.

A hand rubs my back. "It's okay, Arabella."

The quiet voice filters in, and the illusion shatters. I struggle free of his embrace and take a step back from him. My head throbs at my sudden move, and I wince.

Kellan gives me a wink. "Don't worry, I won't tell Miles that you broke down in my arms. We wouldn't want to make him jealous."

I flip up my middle finger, and he laughs.

It's only then I notice he's taken me to one of the empty classrooms where no one can see us.

"You can g-go."

He shakes his head. “Miss. Winters ordered me to get you to the nurse, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“You don’t have to pretend to be nice to me. I know you hate me as much as Eli does.” I scrub my palms over my cheeks and brush away the wetness. I don’t trust the headspace I’m in right now. I’m frightened I’m going to say something that can be used against me.

Kellan crouches and picks up my bag. I don’t remember dropping it. Instead of handing it back to me, he loops the strap over his shoulder, while he watches me with serious gray eyes. “As much as I’m sure you think I’m enjoying this, you’d be wrong. But I think we should just focus on getting you a painkiller.”

I press my lips together. I don’t want to admit he is right. My skull feels as though it’s going to explode and all I want to do is huddle somewhere dark. We leave the classroom together. Kellan remains quiet, but I can sense him staring at me from time to time. Once we reach the medical wing, he gives me back my bag.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

He gives me a solemn smile. “You’re welcome.”

Why does this feel so weird?

The nurse sends him away, much to my relief. I’m given a painkiller and ordered back to my room with strict instructions to keep it dark. I do as I’m told, and the pain in my head has lessened a little by the time I crawl into my bed. I drag the blanket up over my head. My cell chimes, but I ignore it.

I’m tired, hurt, and all I want to do is block out the world for a while.

CHAPTER 112

ELI

Kellan's face is troubled when he returns to the classroom and drops into the seat next to me. I can't question him until the end of class and, even then, we barely have time because we have separate places to go to. I have art, he has computer science and they're in different buildings. I have to be satisfied with a quick rundown of what happened.

"She didn't seem right, Eli. More than just the migraine she was claiming. I think everything is getting to her."

I chew on my lip. "You think I should leave her alone?" I haven't told him about last night. Has she realized it's me? Is that why she was in such a mess this morning?

"You've already backed off during the day. I'm not sure what more you can do. Quit sending her messages and meeting with her at night? I don't know if that's what she wants." He angles a knowing look at me. "I *know* it's not what you want."

I don't respond to that. He checks the time on his cell's screen. "I better go; otherwise, McMillan will have my head. You know how he hates people being late. Meet you at lunch?"

I nod, and we both go our separate ways.

There's no sign of Arabella in art, and I spend most of the class wondering whether she's really sick or just needed to get away from everyone. When the class ends, I'm halfway to the dorm building before I get hold of myself.

I can't just fucking turn up outside her room and demand to know how she is. I stop in the middle of the path and pull out the cell I use to contact her with.

Me: What happened to you today?

I wait, but she doesn't reply. I gnaw at the inside of my cheek. I'm not used to feeling indecisive, and I don't like it. Spinning back toward the cafeteria building, I head inside to meet Kellan for lunch.

Neither of us talks much while we eat, both wrapped up in our own thoughts and the rest of the day follows a similar pattern. Arabella doesn't return for any more classes, and I overhear Lacy telling the rest of her

friends that her roommate has a bad migraine and won't be at cheer practice after school that day. A discussion on whether she should be removed completely from the squad follows that, and I don't wait around to hear the result because I'm not sure I can stop myself from saying something.

When she doesn't show up for class the following morning, I start making plans, and by late Thursday I have everything I need in place.

Me: Tomorrow night, Kitten. If you're not there, then I'll assume we're done.

I switch off the cell to stop myself from checking it every few minutes and spend the rest of the day working on my sculpture. I'm leaving early Saturday morning to drive back home for a Thanksgiving that I'm sure will be a disaster. The only bright side is that Kellan will be there to stop me from slowly going insane.

Friday moves at a crawl. Arabella still hasn't answered my text, so I'm continuing forward on the assumption that she'll turn up, simply because she has to go home for a week and spend time with the stepbrother she hates.

I head to the tomb before curfew, set everything up, and then sketch for an hour. When my alarm sounds to tell me it's the time I usually meet her at the bench, I clear away my sketchbook and walk outside. I refuse to entertain the thought she might not be there, but can't ignore the relief I feel when I find her sitting on the bench.

"Hey, Kitten." I stroke my fingers over her cheek, and she turns her face into my palm. The move twists something inside of me, but I push it aside, and tug her to her feet.

She lets me lead her to the tomb without comment, and her silence makes me uneasy. Instead of lifting her onto the coffin, I lead her around it to where I've spread out a blanket.

"Sit down." I guide her down, then go back to the doors so I can close and lock them from the inside.

She's plucking at the soft fleecy material under her palms when I turn back. I kneel beside her and reach for the bowl of strawberries I've placed at the edge.

"Open your mouth." I feel fucking stupid doing this, but Kellan assures me it's a good idea. I'm questioning his sanity, even as I place the fruit against her lips. "Bite."

She does as I say. The juice from the strawberry covers her lips and her tongue comes out to lick it away. I pick up another one and instruct her to bite again, but this time it's *my* tongue that sweeps up the sweetness from her lips before she can.

She gasps softly, and my tongue invades her mouth, chasing the strawberry flavor, and the pressure of my mouth forces her backward until she's lying flat and I'm above her. I shift position, bracing myself up on one hand beside her head, and push a leg between her thighs.

Our tongues entwine, duel, battle for dominance. I nip at her lips, sliding one hand beneath her top to curve over her breast, while her arms loop around my neck, pulling me deeper into the kiss. She's eager, hungry, *demanding*, her fingers spearing into my hair.

The thought that I need to stop her touching me is quickly set aside in favor of the sensations of her fingers curling, tugging at my hair. Her touch is like quickfire, setting my body alight and my dick strains against the front of my sweats, craving more.

I reach behind me and grip her wrist so I can pull it away and down beneath the waistband of my pants. Her fingers curl around my dick, squeezing, and I groan into her mouth. I drag my lips away from hers and kiss my way down her throat, sucking at the soft, fragrant skin as I make my way down to her breast.

My fingers stroke and pinch her nipple into a stiff peak that I take into my mouth through the material of her shirt, my tongue flicking against it.

"More!" Her demand is throaty, and I comply, dragging her t-shirt up to bare her breasts.

I get a quick glimpse of creamy skin before she drags my head down. I catch a nipple between my teeth and press my thigh against her pussy. She rubs against me, grinding herself up and down, and her wetness soaks through her yoga pants *and* my sweats.

I trail my hand down her body, under her pants and between her legs, which spread eagerly, *wantonly*. She's hot, wet, and my finger slides into her body easily. Her back arches, ass lifting up and my mouth follows the direction of my hand, kissing over her stomach, licking a circle around her navel and down. She pulls her hands away from my body and pushes her pants down over her hips just in time for my mouth to land on her pussy.

Our groans echo around the tomb in tandem as my tongue connects with her clit.

I haven't touched her like this in days and I feast on her like I'm starved, flattening a hand against her stomach when she tries to arch up.

"Don't move," I growl. She ignores me so I bite her, catching the fleshy outer lip of her pussy between my teeth.

She gasps. A gasp that turns into a whimper when I sweep my tongue over her clit again. My fingers pump in and out of her body, slippery with her arousal and my dick is so fucking hard, I'm not sure I'll be able to last if she puts her hands back on me.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you," I demand.

She doesn't reply, lost to the pleasure of my mouth and fingers.

"Say fucking *green*," I snarl, lifting so I can release my dick from my sweats. "Say it, Arabella." I grip her chin between my fingers and kiss her—*hard*. "Say. Fucking. Green."

My other hand is between her legs, preparing her for my dick, stretching her pussy so it can take me. But she still hasn't fucking said yes. I kiss her again, my teeth leaving marks on her lips, her jaw, her throat as she writhes and arches and moans against me.

Her hand finds my dick, curls around it and drags me against her. She's still wearing her yoga pants, but her legs are wide enough for her to bring my dick against her pussy and I pull my fingers free so she can guide me in.

I bring my soaked fingers up to her lips, and smear her juices over them before bending my head to lick them clean. "Red or green?" I repeat. "Tell me you want me to fuck you."

My dick is primed and ready. I can feel her slickness against the head, and I'm all ready to shove inside when she speaks.

"Yes. Green. Now. Please, Sin. Please, fuck me."

Time stops. *I freeze.*

Please, Sin.

Not *Eli*, but Sin.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 113

ARABELLA

“Yes. Green. Now.” I groan. “Please, Sin. Please, fuck me.”

The weight of his body on top of me is hot and heavy. I can feel his cock probing at my entrance. My brain is mush, and I can’t think beyond the pleasure taking over my body. I need him inside me. I’m delirious about something I’ve never experienced before, and I don’t care if the first time will hurt.

I’ve been trapped in a well of misery for days, and his message to meet him was a bright light in my sadness. I hadn’t known what to expect, what he was planning, and part of me expected another talk or goodbye.

I rub myself eagerly against him, half out of my mind with want, and it takes a minute or two for awareness to creep in. He’s gone still in my arms.

“Take me.” Wiggling downward, the tip of his cock slips inside me.

We both moan.

“No.” His hands grab my hips roughly, pinning them down.

“Sin?”

“I can’t do this.” His words come out choked and pained.

“W—what?”

“I can’t fuck you like this.”

“But I want you.” My brain is having a hard time processing what he’s saying. “Please, it hurts so bad. I need you inside me.”

“Shit.” He moves to untangle himself from my legs and arms.

I clutch at him, but he pushes me down. “Where are you going?”

I can hear his harsh breathing moving away from me. I’m tempted to take off my blindfold, but I don’t. This will end if I do.

Raising my hips, I stroke my fingers between my legs instead. “Please, please, fuck me. I’m so wet for you.”

A tortured groan comes from somewhere in front of me. “Kitten.”

“I’ve been your good girl. I’ve done everything you asked of me.” I can’t keep the desperation from my voice while I play with myself. “Please don’t leave me like this. I’m yours. All yours. I don’t want anyone else, just you.”

Silence.

My heart clenches. “Sin?”

Nothing.

“Sin?” My voice is thick with tears and fear.

Pulling the blindfold from my eyes, I let them adjust to the soft glow of the flashlight. Shadows flicker over the walls of the tomb. An abandoned bowl of strawberries is beside me on the blanket.

There’s no sign of Sin.

The crushing rejection steals my breath.

What happened? Why didn’t he take me? I’m willing and ready. Why did he stop? Is this part of his game? To twist me up inside with so much need that it’s physical agony that I want him so much.

My mind swims in a sea of confusion as I stare at the stone of the coffin.

“Sin, please.” My lips tremble, wetness drips off my chin. I curl into a ball on the blanket and sob. My chest has been ripped open all over again, and he’s left me here to bleed out in desolation and confusion.

Is this what he wanted? I don’t understand.

I cry and cry until my throat aches, and I don’t have anything more to give. Until numbness settles over me.

I can’t stay here.

Sin is gone.

I’m not sure if he’ll come back after this, and even if he tries, the thought of meeting him again fills me with bitterness.

I climb to my feet, pulling up my panties and sweats, and I hurry for the open door. Head down, I pass through the gravestones toward the gate.

Why is he torturing me?

Why does he make me feel things for him if he always intended to snatch it all away?

CHAPTER 114

ELI

“—listening to me?” Kellan’s voice reaches me between songs. I tap stop on my music and turn in the passenger seat to look at him.

I gave him the keys to my car and told him to drive my car back to the Hamptons. I’ve barely slept and don’t trust myself behind the wheel.

“What?”

“I *said*, are you listening to me, but obviously you’re not.”

“I asked you to drive because I wanted to sleep. What do you want?”

“I want you to wake up and look like you aren’t half dead. We’re about ten minutes away from your house.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, Eli. *Oh*. What the fuck happened last night? Was she allergic to strawberries?” He slams his foot on the brakes and the car stops, throwing us both forward in our seats. “Fuck. She *wasn’t*, was she?”

I sigh. “No. No allergies.”

“Then why the fuck are you acting like you didn’t get some candy last night?”

I don’t answer. His eyes are boring into the side of my head, then he starts to cackle.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You didn’t fuck her, did you?” He sets the car back into motion. “It was a fucking sure thing. *How* did you fuck that up?”

“She called me Sin,” I mutter.

“She called you ... *what*?”

“That’s what she calls me. She didn’t call me Eli.”

“Of course, she didn’t fucking call you Eli. She doesn’t *know* you’re Eli.” He glances at me. “Wait ... wait a minute ... oh fuck. You caught feelings.”

“I didn’t.”

“Like fuck. You totally caught feelings. You wanted her to want *you*, not her dirty little secret in the dark.”

He’s laughing so hard I’m worried we might crash.

“Do you think you could save this interrogation for when we’re not on the road?” I bite out.

Kellan snickers again. “Eli Travers is in love. This is fucking hysterical.”

“I’m not in love.”

He turns onto the circular drive leading up to my house. “Yes, my friend, you are.”

We’re greeted by my stepmother when we walk into the hall.

“Eli, *darling!*” Elena hurries toward me, arms outstretched.

I sidestep the incoming hug. “This is Kellan. I assume Dad told you he was coming to stay?”

Something flickers in her eyes, but her smile doesn’t falter. “I’ve made up the room next to yours for him. I hope that’s okay?” She looks behind me. “Is Arabella with you?”

“She’s not here already?” The hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I know for a *fact* she left with Jace and Evan two hours before we did. I was standing at the window in our room and saw the car drive past.

“Arabella opted to drive with two of our football team,” Kellan says into the silence. “Maybe they stopped somewhere along the way.”

“Boys? Are you *sure*? I didn’t think Arabella even *liked* boys!”

“Oh, I assure you, she likes us well enough,” I mutter. “Let’s go.” I walk past her and up the staircase.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Travers. I can see where Arabella gets her looks from.” Kellan’s words set my teeth on edge.

“Oh, you’re very sweet.” She laughs, and my jaw clenches. “Go and get settled and I’ll ask the cook to make you boys something to eat. You must be hungry.”

Kellan catches up to me just as I reach my room. “You didn’t say your new mom is hot.”

“She snagged a rich husband. Of course, she’s hot. My father didn’t marry her for her personality.”

I push open the door to my bedroom and step inside. Kellan follows.

“Why do you think she’s late?”

I know who he’s talking about. I shrug.

“You can’t tell me you’re not curious. Jace has been eager to get into her pants since she joined the school. Do you think they stopped somewhere so she could suck a dick or two?”

CHAPTER 115

ARABELLA

The phone I use to text Sin is missing. As much as I hate him right now for leaving me the way he did last night, I don't want to be without it.

Did I leave it in the tomb?

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I try to think through my tiredness. I'm feeling vulnerable and exposed after yet another sleepless night. At least I'll have a few days away from school now that everyone is leaving for the Thanksgiving break.

A thump on the door of my room distracts me from my search. "Come in."

Evan opens it. "Jace wants to leave in ten minutes." He looks at the mess on my side of the room. "Whoa! Why do you girls always leave packing until the last minute?"

I glance up from the clothes strewn all over my bed. "I'm looking for something."

"Well, whatever it is, you're going to have to leave it," Evan eyes the chaos. "Or you're going to miss your ride."

Fuck.

"I'll be down before you go."

He nods. "Okay."

Once he's left, I grab the bundle of clothes and shove them back into my wardrobe. My case is already packed. I'm taking the bare minimum back to the house with me.

Why does Sin's rejection ache so much?

He's taken a little piece of my soul.

He understood me in ways no one else does. When I wasn't with him, I wished he was there. When we were together, I wanted the moment to last forever. I'd wanted to live in the feeling. Wrap myself up in it.

It aches because I'm in love with him.

The truth just makes me feel worse.

I zip up my hoodie, lift the hood and tug it over my head, and wheel my suitcase out into the hallway. I pause long enough to lock the door, and then

head outside. Jace and Evan are waiting for me in the parking lot, beside a big silver car.

“You’re in front,” Evan announces, and takes my suitcase around to the trunk.

I don’t move. “I don’t mind being in the back.”

Jace opens the driver’s door. “I’d rather have you up with me.”

Has Sin already left? Where is he now? Why do I still care?

Rounding the car, I open the passenger side and get in. The smell of expensive leather teases my nose, the seat cocooning me as I do up my seatbelt. Jace is already behind the wheel, and Evan is installed in the back. He maneuvers the vehicle smoothly out of its bay and takes off down the driveway.

“Are you looking forward to alone time with Eli?”

I press my lips together at Jace’s question. “No.”

“I bet he is.” Evan chuckles from the backseat. “Do you know Travers has fucked half the girls in the school? They whisper about it because they don’t want to get caught having sex with him.”

I keep my gaze locked on the road through the window. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Just thought you should know.”

“I’m not interested in Eli.”

The car surges forward as Jace puts his foot down, sending us shooting along the road.

Heart in my mouth, I clutch at my seat. “Slow down!”

He takes his eye off the road for a second to flash me a grin. “What’s the matter? Don’t you like fast cars?”

“No.” My voice is shrill.

“Dude, enough. We don’t want to get pulled over by the cops,” Evan huffs.

“I’m just messing with her.” Jace laughs but slows down.

I dig my earbuds out of my pocket, and I put them in, desperate for a distraction. The lyrics of ‘Break the Spell’ by Daughtry saves me from any further conversation. As much as I want to sleep, I’m too tense to attempt it. I don’t trust Jace and Evan not to mess with me. The song ends transitioning into a different one, and I relax into the music.

We’re two hours into the journey when Jace slows the car and pulls over in the middle of nowhere.

I pull one of the earbuds out. "Why did we stop?"

"Evan needed a piss," Jace says.

The other jock gets out of the back.

Minutes tick by in silence before he returns.

Jace doesn't start the car.

I glance his way again.

He's staring at me with a smile that puts me on edge. "Seeing as I'm driving you home, I think I should get something in return."

"You want payment?" I ask slowly.

"You gave Mr. Drake a show." His attention flicks down to my chest. "I want one too."

"Take your top off." Evan leans in between the seats.

I cross my arms, covering my breasts, and shake my head. "No."

"You better get the fuck out and start walking then."

"Please don't do this." My attention moves to Evan, but his expression is just as unfriendly as his friend's.

"Your choice, Arabella." Jace rests his forearms on the steering wheel. "Show us your tits or get out of my car."

No fucking way.

I reach for my bag by my feet.

"Leave it," Evan orders.

I stare at him in a mix of disbelief and anger. "What?"

"You don't get to take anything with you."

"But my phone and money are in there."

The two of them don't reply. When it's obvious this isn't some big joke, I get out of the car and slam the door shut. I've made it two steps before Jace takes off and passes me with Evan hollering out of the window.

Hunching my shoulders against the cold, I shove my hands in the pockets of my hoodie and head in the same direction. I'm not even sure where the hell I am. The first trip to the school with Eli I'd slept through. Nothing looks familiar. I walk and walk, until my feet hurt. I'm tired and my head aches. Another hour passes before I see the car again.

Evan and Jace are parked up on the roadside, waiting for me. Both have drinks in their hands, leaning back on the side of the vehicle as though they don't have a care in the world.

"We thought we'd give you one more chance," Evan tells me when I reach them. "It's going to get dark soon. You could try hitchhiking, but a

pretty girl like you would probably have to suck someone's dick for a ride. All we're asking for is a look at your tits."

I glance away from him. What are my options? Keep walking and hope no one tries to rape me or flash my breasts at them. "Fine. I'll do it."

Evan opens the passenger side door for me. "Good girl."

The words on his lips don't cause the same reaction as when Sin says it. They make me feel sick. I don't feel good. What they are making me do makes me feel dirty, and not in a nice way.

I climb into the car, and Jace closes the door behind me. Both boys take their seats and face me.

I strip off my hoodie and remove my t-shirt.

Jace gestures at my white lacy bra. "Now that."

Eyes closed, I swallow hard, and reach around to unclip it. I don't remove it completely but let the straps fall free until the cups sag down enough for the nipples to be visible.

Evan groans. "Miles is one lucky bastard."

"I want a photograph," Jace says.

"No." Arms coming up, I cover myself. "That wasn't the deal."

"Do it or get out. But this time you'll be walking topless. Let's see you explain that to your mom when you get home."

My arms drop to my sides.

Jace reaches out to grip my chin and presses his thumb against my lips. A tear escapes the corner of my eye, but I remain motionless as he snaps a photo of me half-naked with his phone.

He releases me, sits back and grins. "I might just send this to Travers so he can see what he's missing."

I scramble back into my bra and top, then scrub away the tears leaking from my eyes. "You got what you wanted. Now take me home."

I huddle in my seat, and keep my face averted away from him as he starts the car. Staring out the window, I watch the scenery pass by, my thoughts centered inward. Not even my music can soothe me this time. I shudder at the thought of what he might do with that photo.

Maybe I should have just taken a risk with the dark and hitchhiked?

I breathe a sigh of relief as we finally pull up outside in the circular drive of the house. Even before Jace comes to a halt, I'm unbuckling my seatbelt.

"See you back at school."

Jace smirks. "Have fun with Eli, and let me know if you need a lift back."

He pops the trunk but neither of them gets out to help me with my case. I'm exhausted, my nerves are frayed, I feel violated, and I just want to get as far away from them as possible. I take out my suitcase and walk up to the door and ring the doorbell. Jace's car takes off down the road before the door opens. One of the maids greets me with a smile, and I'm ushered into the hallway.

Eli is leaning against the living room door when I enter. Kellan is behind him, and he gives me a friendly smile. My stomach lurches at the sight of both of them.

What's he doing here?

I don't delude myself for a second that this hasn't been planned.

Everything inside me wants to run in the other direction.

Elena emerges from another door, dressed in a figure-hugging pale blue dress. "Arabella, where have you been? You're late."

I tighten my grip on the handle of my case. "I got a lift with a friend."

"Eli arrived home ages ago."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her this isn't my home, but I swallow the words down like a bitter pill. "I'm going to my room."

Her eyes narrow on my face. "You look pale."

I force a weak smile; aware we still have an audience. "I got a little car sick."

"Go and freshen up, and then we can spend some family time together. There's a bowl of strawberries in the fridge if you want a healthy snack."

The last time I tasted one is seared into my brain. I blink fast to stop the burn of tears and duck my head. "No thanks."

I grab the handle of my suitcase and rush up the staircase.

CHAPTER 116

ELI

“What the fuck?” It’s the fourth time I’ve uttered the phrase since coming home.

I stop in the doorway. Elena *fucking* Travers has redecorated the dining room. It’s no longer covered in gray wallpaper, with dark wooden floors. The long table, which was able to seat twelve, has been replaced, and the expensive landscape paintings that graced the walls are gone.

Now there’s a smaller black table in the center of the room, surrounded by six high-back upholstered light gray chairs. The wooden floor is still there, but a textured white and gray rug breaks up the darkness. All the walls have been painted white, aside from one, which is now a deep blue. A large painting is positioned centrally on that wall. The crystal chandelier that had hung above the table has also been replaced. Now it’s a small cluster of pendant lights, giving a less formal look to the entire room.

My jaw clenches. I fucking hate to admit it, but it looks good. Less formal dining and more family intimate. It pains me to like it. But the artist in me appreciates the subtle elegance. She *must* have hired an interior decorator. There’s no way the woman could have come up with this alone. This, the kitchen, the entrance hall, and the garden have all been updated and I haven’t been able to criticize any of the fucking changes.

Arabella and my father are already seated at the table. She looks up when we enter, then away as soon as our gazes clash.

“Eli! Kellan!” My dad rises to his feet and skirts the table to grab us both. He pulls the pair of us into a rough hug, then waves a hand at the room.

“Didn’t Elena do an amazing job? Come, sit down. Kellan, you’re seated on the right. Eli, sit next to Arabella.”

She stiffens imperceptibly. No one would have noticed the move, but I was watching for it. I pull out the chair beside her and sink onto it. She’s so tense beside me, she’s almost vibrating. I ignore her and tap the tabletop.

“I’m sure the interior designer she hired worked hard.”

“Oh, no, Son.” My dad shakes his head. “This was all Elena. She even painted the walls.” He laughs. “You should have seen her. I came home from work one night and her hair was *blue*.”

“*Elena* did the decorating?” I can’t keep the disbelief from my tone.

Arabella stirs beside me. “My mom has always enjoyed decorating.” She sounds like the words are being pulled from her. “We just never had the—” Her mouth shuts with an audible click of teeth, but I could guess what she was going to say.

They’d never had the money to do it. That familiar anger rises, but this time it’s not because I still think she’s using my father for the money he has. Her mom might be doing that, but I’m confident Arabella had no part in her plot. No, my anger this time is because she *hasn’t* taken advantage of what she’s now gained access to. Even though my dad gave her a credit card with a huge spending limit, she has barely used it for anything. I know that because I saw the statement on the desk in my dad’s office when I walked in there earlier to see if he was home.

“Where is *Elena*?”

“She’ll be here shortly.” My dad’s voice is more relaxed than I’ve heard in a long time. “Arabella, how are you finding Churchill Bradley? Has Eli been looking after you?”

Kellan snorts from across the table, shoulders shaking as he tries to muffle his laughter. I swing my foot and connect with his ankle. That only makes him laugh harder.

“Something funny, Kellan?” Dad asks.

“No, sir. Not really.” He takes a gulp of water. “Arabella doesn’t hang with us. She prefers the cheer squad and the jocks.”

“You’re on the cheer squad?” *Elena* claps her hands together as she enters the room. “That’s wonderful!”

If looks could kill, Kellan would be dead on the floor from the glare Arabella nails him with, but she doesn’t say anything.

“What about you, Eli? Your dad said you’re working on something big for your art project?” The blonde woman walks to the head of the table, rests her hand on my dad’s shoulder and presses a kiss to his cheek. “I’m sorry I’m late. The cook wanted me to taste the soup she made.”

“How was it?” He reaches up to squeeze her fingers.

“Oh my gosh. *Glorious!* I had to concede she was right, and I was wrong.” She laughs and goes to the other end of the table to sit down. “Tell us about your art, Eli.”

I shrug. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Well, what is it?”

“A sculpture.”

“That’s exciting. Is it clay?”

“No, marble.”

Her eyes round. “Isn’t that difficult? What if you make a mistake?”

“Then I’ve wasted ten grand’s worth of stone.” I sound far more casual about it than I feel. If I fuck it up, I’ll be furious. She doesn’t need to know that.

“That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s fine. School can afford it. Shouldn’t you be asking what your daughter is doing for *her* project?”

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CHAPTER 117

ARABELLA

“It’s just a dress,” I mumble when everyone looks my way.

“You always did like to play dress up and make things.” Elena smiles. “Do you remember when you were six, and you put one of my dresses on and pretended to be a princess?”

“Yes, it was the same night—” My words trail off before I can finish, and I touch the two burn marks above my right wrist.

My mother’s eyes widen, and she pales. “I’m sure it will be just as impressive as Eli’s statue.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Eli and Kellan watching us intently. I’d be happier without them around. With the changes Elena has been making to the house, I’m sure Eli despises her even more than ever. It’s just another reason for him to loathe me.

“Are you enjoying being on the cheer squad?” She changes the subject.

I shrug. “It’s okay.”

“She’s dating the captain of the swim team,” Kellan tells her.

Curling my fingers into fists on my lap, the nails bite into my palms. “His name is Miles.”

“Is he good looking?” That piques my mother’s interest.

Kellan nods, grinning. “He’s got a pretty face.”

“I hope you’re being careful, Bella. Using protect—”

Heat scalds my cheeks, and I roll my eyes. “Thanks, but I don’t need your advice.”

Eli must be getting a kick out of this. Please don’t let Jace send him the photo he took in the car.

The thought of him seeing what I had to do makes everything inside me cringe. I’m already humiliated enough over it.

The maids enter, carrying silver trays. They place china bowls in front of us. Staring down at the green soup, my stomach revolts at the sight of it. Elena continues to chatter, but my thoughts turn inward, shunning any more conversation.

All I want to do is go back to my room and search for my old diary. There was no sign of it under the bed, and I’m anxious to search the rest of

my room and hide it with my new one. If Eli gets his hands on it, I will never be able to live it down. I don't want him to read about the secrets and fantasies that have been building in my head.

Fantasies that started to come to life with Sin.

My fingers itch for the phone I've lost, and I can't stop worrying about it.

If he finds it in the tomb, will he send it back to me?

God, I'm pathetic for wanting him to.

He's rejected me twice, but I know I'll still go crawling back if he contacts me. I need his attention like I need air to breathe.

"Where's that tacky colorful bracelet you always wear?" Elena's voice drags me back to the present.

I swirl the soup around with my spoon. "I lost it."

"Would you like a new one for Christmas?"

"No thanks."

"Something in silver with expensive charms," she continues. "Every woman loves diamonds. And it would be more elegant than the cheap ones she had."

"They weren't just charms." My voice grows thick with the mixed-up emotions that have been threatening to escape. "They were memories and promises. Dreams of all the places I planned to go. Reminders of my best friend, our laughter, and that one day, this shitty life I live will get better. So, yes, that tacky bracelet mattered to me." I'm shouting by the last word.

The entire room goes still as I rise from my seat.

Shock ripples over my mother's face. "Arabella Travers, sit down immediately."

Her sharp words catch me on a raw nerve. "Gray! My surname is *Gray*. It will *never* be Travers."

She gasps. "What's gotten into you?"

"I'm sure Arabella is just feeling tired, that's all. The last few months have probably been overwhelming and stressful." Elliot's smile is kind. "A new family. New School. New friends—"

I almost laugh bitterly at that last one. The only friend I have is Miles.

"—everything changed so fast for her. Eli is still adjusting to having you both in our lives, too, but hopefully, they will become friends."

"I don't want to be her *friend*," Eli mutters, a nerve ticking in his jaw.

I glare at him. "I'd rather gouge my eyes out with a fork."

“Arabella, enough!” Elena snaps. “We do not speak to people like that at the dinner table. Sit down and finish your meal. Now!”

I retake my seat, but I don’t touch the soup getting cold in front of me.

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CHAPTER 118

ELI

The only time I see Arabella over the next two days is at the dinner table. My dad seems oblivious to the tension, but Elena's eyes dart between the two of us. Kellan tries to ease the situation by making conversation with both of them. I don't even pretend to be happy about playing happy families. Having her so close to me and not being able to reach out and touch her is torture. I can smell her perfume, feel the heat of her body, and I walk away from dinner each night shielding the erection I'm sporting.

Elena seems to be thriving in her position of trophy wife. She's thrown herself into everything the wife of a rich businessman seems to be. Dinner parties, charities, and gala events. You name it, she's involved in it. So, when she announces that she's been invited to host the annual Thanksgiving party at the Country Club, I'm not even surprised. What *does* surprise me are the words that follow the announcement.

"I told them that while I'd love to do it, I want our first Thanksgiving dinner together to be here at home as a family, so we're having the party on Friday instead."

"Good idea, darling." My father drapes his arm across her shoulders and pulls her into his side.

I turn away. I don't want to see him with a woman who isn't my mother. Maybe that's selfish of me. I want my dad to be happy. I do. But my heart just can't take the thought of that happening with someone other than my mother.

My cell chimes as I'm climbing the stairs to wake Kellan up and, frowning, I pull it out.

Who's messaging me?

Kellan is here. And Arabella hasn't texted my other cell since I left her naked and desperate in the tomb. I'm pretty confident I've ruined whatever had been happening between us with my decision that night. But the truth is, I didn't want to fuck her as Sin. I want to fuck her as *me*.

Unlocking my phone, I discover the notification is from the school's social media app and not a text.

Why the fuck is Jace Black messaging me?

I open the message and stop on the stairs, staring down at it.

My hand gripping the smooth wood of the handrail tightens and I swear softly. “No fucking way.” My eyes scan over the message.

Jace Black: Hey, Travers, you might have sucked on her tongue, but I got her tits.

The photograph attached is Arabella, topless. A hand is gripping her chin while she stares at the camera, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. There’s a sheen over her eyes.

Fucking tears.

I grind my teeth, the muscle popping in my jaw.

Tucking the cell back into my pocket, I surge back into movement, taking the stairs two at a time. I don’t even knock on Kellan’s door, just shove it open and walk in.

“Get up.” I kick the side of the bed.

“What the fuck? Unless you’re coming in here to give me a good morning blowjob, fuck off.”

“Get the fuck out of bed. We have somewhere to be.”

He shoves his hair away from his face and sits up. “We have no plans today. *You* said so.” He clears his throat and does his shitty impression of me. “You can come to my place for Thanksgiving. You can stay in bed all day if you want to.”

“I never said that. And I don’t sound like that. Get dressed. Wear something you don’t mind getting dirty.”

That gets his attention. “Are we going to do something dirty?”

“I am. You can join in if you like.”

He swings his legs off the bed and stands, walking naked across to the closet.

“And what are you doing?”

My grin is a baring of teeth. “You’ll see when we get there.”

“Where did he take that photograph?” We’re sitting in the car outside Jace Black’s house.

“On the drive here. If you zoom in, you can see the road sign.” I reach across and expand the image.

“Do you think she did more than flash them? Is that why she was so late getting here?”

I think back to how she looked when she finally turned up at the house. Pale, tired, and a little shaky. I put it down to coming to the house and knowing I was there, but what if there was more behind it?

Tension zipped through my body. If they fucking touched her, I'm going to kill them ... *slowly*.

"You know you can't just walk into his house and beat him to death, don't you?"

"That's why *you're* here."

"Look, Eli, I love you and all that, but *I'm* not walking in there and beating him to death, either. There are way too many witnesses."

I roll my eyes. "Go and fucking knock on the door and see where he is. He won't be home. He never is during the holidays. Find out where he is, and we go there."

"Ahh, that's a good idea. I'll do that." Kellan throws open the door, and heads toward the house. A quick conversation with whoever answers it, and he's back. "He's down at the stables."

"Perfect." I set the car back into motion and drive down the road that'll take us to the stables. I know which ones he'll be at. My mom had horses at the same place. She'd been friendly with Jace's mom, and we often ended up stuck together as kids.

Me, him, and Evan spent most of our free time together ... until we didn't.

I find a parking space out of the way, and climb out, pulling a ski mask out of my pocket.

"You don't want him to know it's you?"

"Oh, I definitely want him to know it's me. I just don't want anyone else to know. Go and find him. I'll wait back here."

CHAPTER 119

ARABELLA

I'm wary of bumping into Eli when I make my way downstairs. He came back to the house a few days ago with bloodied knuckles and wearing a scowl.

Whatever happened, it left him in a bad mood. I'm sure, if he could find a way, he'd blame me for it, so I've been avoiding him as much as I can, desperate to stay out of his volatile orbit. Kellan has been friendly the few times we've spoken, but I've kept our interactions brief.

I find Elena in the dining room putting the last few touches to the elegant floral centerpiece for the table. A full glass of red wine is beside her.

"Bella, you're a few minutes early for dinner. No one else will be down for at least ten more minutes." Raising her glass, she takes a sip.

Now she's opened a bottle, I know she won't stop. She won't be sober for long, especially without any food in her stomach. I can already foresee the mess she's going to make over the dinner table. I've seen it a million times before in the past.

The question that's been niggling at me for years finds its way to the surface. A question she's refused to answer all the times I've asked before. It's stronger this time, demanding answers. A possible escape route from the situation I'm in.

I join her at the table. "I want to know about my dad."

Surprise lights Elena's eyes, and she laughs. "Why would you want to know about *him*?"

"Because you've never talked about him. I don't even know his name."

"You have a new father now, and Elliot is a good man. He'll treat us both right. You'll see."

I frown, the resentment within me building. "Why won't you tell me who he is? Why is it a secret? Don't I have the right to know?"

She's silent for a moment, studying me thoughtfully, her fingers stroking the petals of the bouquet she's still arranging.

"I guess you're old enough to know now. His name was Tom. We met when I was eighteen. He had the most beautiful smile. I was young. I thought I was in love, and he made me feel so special."

My heart constricts. “What happened?”

The dreamy expression slides off her face. “He knocked me up. Of course, he said it was my fault for agreeing to let him fuck me without a condom a few times. The morning after pill I took failed, and here you are.” She gestures at me with her free hand.

Every tiny, fragile hope I’ve been carrying since I was small is shattered by her cruel careless words.

“He—he dumped you because you were pregnant?”

“Your dear daddy wanted me to get rid of you. It wouldn’t have looked good for him as a teacher at the school I was attending. Plus, he had a wife and kids.” She takes a sip of wine.

My stomach twists, acid burning like fire in my gut. “My dad was one of your teachers?”

Elena gives me a pitying look. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you, sweetheart. I’m sorry if I’ve destroyed all your fairytales, but you need to know the realities of life. I ended up dropping out of school. My mother wasn’t thrilled that I decided to keep you. Dad died a few years earlier, and it was just the two of us. Do you remember Mee-maw? She passed away when you were three.”

“No.” I swallow thickly, the word grating against my tongue.

“She used to braid your hair and sing you to sleep at night. That woman practically raised you for the first few years of your life.”

The truth is a poison, burning its way through me down to the rest of the trauma I’ve kept buried.

Her attention returns to the flowers she’s arranging. “You’re better off without your father. He didn’t want you, sweetheart. We have a better life here. You need to look to the future, not the past.”

Her words stay with me during our dinner. There’s a heaviness weighing down on me, so intense it has my eyes stinging with tears. The sadness becomes all-consuming, and all I can think about is how neither of my parents want me.

I take no notice of the conversation going on around me. The food tastes like sawdust in my mouth, and I manage a few mouthfuls before I’m done.

I escape to my room as soon as I can, and I’m not sure how long I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, before the thoughts in my head become too much. A glance at my clock shows me it’s midnight.

I scoot off the mattress, and leave my room. The hallway beyond is silent. Someone has left the light on in the entrance hall downstairs, and it provides me with the illumination I need.

The living room is empty, sheathed in shadows from the light spilling in from the hallway. I cross to the bar, and hunt through the bottles, searching for what I'm after. The bottle of vodka is at the back. I remember Miles telling me it has no flavor, and I'm desperate enough to try anything, if it will ease the pain strangling me. Anything to make me forget the worst few months of my life.

I twist off the lid with shaking hands, and fill half a glass, then open a can of Coke to top it up and take a sip.

It doesn't taste as bad as I imagine. I down the rest of the glass and pour myself another one. A strange heat works its way into my belly. The third one I swallow a little more slowly, before I wipe my lips with the back of my hand.

I hate my mom.

I hate Eli.

He got what he wanted. Is he enjoying seeing me in pain?

I hear his voice loud and clear inside my head.

You will never be anything more than the daughter of a gold-digger. You're nothing to me, understand? I won't rest until you're gone. You'll either leave willingly by car or in a box, I don't care which. Frightened Miles will dump you now, knowing you're kissing other guys behind his back? It has to make him wonder if you're spreading your legs for them too.

I rest my hip against the side of the bar, and take another mouthful, a warmth buzzing through my veins.

No one cares.

Elena is more interested in home decorating than she is in me.

When has she ever been interested in me?

Loneliness hits me, and I bite my lip hard to stop the tears threatening to fall.

I don't want to go back to Churchill Bradley Academy. Not with Jace holding that photograph over my head. Tina hates me, and I'm pretty sure Lacy is just using me to make herself look good.

My life is a dumpster fire, and I feel like I'm losing control. I don't know if I want to laugh or cry.

Finishing off my third drink, I leave the glass on the bar. My head is spinning, and I sway to the stairs. Maybe now I can get some sleep.

It takes me a second to realize there's someone in my room.

Eli.

What the fuck?

The anger frozen inside me cracks through the ice. "What do you want?"

He turns at the sound of my voice, and stares at me. "I—"

I step inside and close the door behind me. "What?"

His eyes stay on mine, and he huffs out a breath. "I wanted to return this to you."

My gaze falls to the book clasped in his hands. I recognize the pink cover but not the little gold lock holding it closed. He's holding out my diary. The old one I thought I'd left here in my room.

He's still talking, but I can't hear him past the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears.

He took my diary.

He read my words.

My innermost private feelings.

My darkest fantasies.

Everything.

Something molten and destructive crashes through me. A reckless fury that splinters the torment that's been eating away at me for weeks. Eyes snapping up to his face, I lunge at him, filled with the wild, desperate need to see him bleed.

CHAPTER 120

ELI

Her lunge takes me by surprise, and I stagger back a step under the force of her blow against my chest.

“Why do you hate me so much?” she screams and slams her fist against me again. “What did I *ever* do to you?”

“I don’t—” But I can’t get another word out before she hits me again.

This time she strikes my face. Her palm connects with my cheek, snapping my head sideways. Before I can stop her, she lashes out with her other hand, and I feel the sting as her nails rip into my throat.

I grit my teeth and face her. “Listen to—”

She curls her fingers into a fist and takes another swing. But this time, I catch her wrist before she makes contact. I step forward, twisting it up behind her back. The position puts her flush against me.

“Enough!” I snap.

She twists, attempting to free herself. “No. It won’t be enough until you’re bloody. Until you’re bleeding the same way you’ve made me bleed.”

“And how have I made you bleed, Princess?”

She tips her head back, blue eyes burning with fury. “You mocked me. You made me feel small, *useless*. You stole my *diary* and read it out to the entire class! You left a dead animal in my locker.”

She renews her struggle, and I tighten my grip on her wrist.

“I *did* do most of those things, but I—”

“Don’t lie to me!”

I’m getting sick of not being able to finish a sentence.

“What reason do I have to lie? There’s no one here except you and me. Yes, I did take your diary. I took *both* of them. I read them. I *used* them. I *did* target you and threaten you. But I never, *not fucking once*, killed an animal.”

“Then maybe it was already dead.”

I release her wrist and grab her shoulders to shake her. “The animal in your locker wasn’t me.”

“You’re a liar.”

“So are you!” I snap the words out and regret them almost immediately when her gaze sharpens.

“What does *that* mean? I haven’t lied.”

“Haven’t you, Princess? I think you tell a lot of lies ... most of them to yourself.”

She spins away, out of my grasp. “Not everyone is like you, Eli. And stop calling me *Princess!*”

“No?” I step up behind her. “Are you sure about that, *Arabella*? Tell me ...” I dip my head and press my lips to her ear. “Did you offer to suck Jace’s dick in return for a ride home? Or was just flashing your tits payment enough for him?”

I know that wasn’t what happened. Jace sang like a canary once I broke a rib or two, but her anger is stoking mine and I’m not about to let her claw at me without retaliating.

“Maybe that’s where I made a mistake. Would you have sucked *my* dick in return for a ride to school, *Princess*?”

This time when she spins and launches herself at me, I’m ready. My fingers curl around her arms and I lift her off her feet, turn, and shove her against the door.

“What’s wrong? Did I strike a nerve?” I taunt her.

Her hands slam against my chest, and she throws her head back, eyes spitting fire at me. I smirk.

“I fucking hate you.” She spits out the words, and they’re loaded with disgust and anger.

“That’s absolutely fine,” I snap. “I fucking hate me, too.”

We glare at each other. I have no idea which one of us makes the first move, but a second later, our mouths collide. Her fingers curl into my t-shirt and haul me closer until her body is pressed tight against mine.

“I hate you.” Her teeth sink into my bottom lip and I grunt. “I hate that you make me want you.” Her hands release my shirt and slide down my chest, until she can take hold of the hem and drag it up.

I don’t stop her, parting our lips long enough to yank the shirt over my head and toss it to one side.

“I hate that you kiss so good.”

I grip her chin between my thumb and forefingers.

“Stop fucking talking,” I demand, and seal my mouth to hers again.

Her hands run up my arms, around my neck, into my hair and she arches into me, her breasts rubbing against my chest. It reminds me that there are clothes between us, a barrier that I need to remove, so I break free and flick the front of her shirt.

“Take it off.”

She doesn’t argue, pulling the t-shirt off and tossing it on top of mine. I can’t stop a smile. She’s wearing the lacy bra I bought. My hand curves over her breast and I squeeze. A soft moan escapes her lips.

“Harder.”

“I said don’t fucking talk.”

She laughs, a brittle humorless sound. “Make me stop.”

My mouth finds hers again, and her lips part eagerly beneath mine for my tongue to invade. Her hands are sliding down my back, into my sweats and her nails dig into my ass, driving me forward until my dick is pressing into her stomach.

“Do you want to fuck me, Eli?”

My name on her lips turns me to stone.

“More than I’ve ever wanted to fuck anyone in my life.” I don’t bother lying. What would be the point? She can feel the evidence right there between us.

She brings one hand between our bodies, pushes it back down into my sweats and wraps her fingers around my dick.

“Do you want to stick your cock into my pussy?” She rubs against me while she strokes up and down.

“I said, stop fucking talking.” The demand ends on a groan when her thumb slides over the head of my dick.

“And I said *make me*,” she whispers against my mouth.

I wrap an arm around her waist and lift her off her feet, turn and stride to the bed.

“If you’re going to change your mind, now’s the time.” I drop her to the mattress, and drag down her yoga pants, taking her panties with them. “Because once I’m inside you, I’m not going to stop.”

Her legs part, showing me a glimpse of wet, glistening flesh, as soon as the pants leave her feet.

“Less talking, more doing. You’ve fucked me in every other way. You might as well complete the set.”

I shove my sweats down, kick out of them, and climb onto the bed, straddling her hips. She immediately grips my dick again, this time circling it with both hands and pumps them up and down.

I reach down to stroke a finger over her pussy and push it inside her. She's wet, hot, and everything I want. She arches up. I push a second finger in, and she moans, hips jerking as she fucks them.

"How many others have been inside you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she taunts. "Afraid you won't match up?"

"Worried I might break you." It's not a lie. She looks so fucking tiny lying beneath me.

She gives a derisive-sounding laugh. "Are you looking for an excuse to stop, Eli? Is that who you really are? All talk and no delivery?"

It's my turn to narrow my eyes at her. I pull my fingers free from her body, swat her hands off my dick and shift my position, so my legs are between hers. "Oh, I can deliver, Princess."

"Prove it then."

I grip my dick, find her entrance, and line myself up.

"Just remember you asked for this," I warn her, and thrust inside.

She screams. *Fucking screams*, and goes rigid beneath me. It takes a second for my brain to process what my eyes are telling me. But when it finally catches up, I start to withdraw, only to find her nails digging a hole in my ass as she fights against my attempt to roll away.

"Don't you dare. Don't you *fucking* dare," she snarls. There are tears in her eyes, fury in her expression as she refuses to free my dick from her pussy.

"What the actual fuck?" I reach back for her hands and drag them above her head. Anger is burning through my veins. At her. At *me* for not recognizing the signs. At Miles because ...

What the fuck?

"Stop fucking clawing at me. How the actual fuck are you still a virgin? I fucking *heard* you with Miles."

She giggles, the sound at odds with the tears spilling down her cheek. She pulls a hand free to dash them away.

"I don't have a dick." Her giggles turn into a full-blown laugh. "Well ..."
She glances down her body to where I'm still inside her. "Well, *technically*, I have one at the moment."

"Fuck's sake." I'm not seeing the humor she so clearly is.

I try to roll away again, and she grabs my hip. “No! You started, now you need to finish. You can’t leave me like this.” Tears spring to her eyes again, her mood swinging from amused to unhappy. I’m getting fucking whiplash from the back and forth. “I can’t be rejected again, Eli. Please!”

“Fuck.” My curse is softer this time. I know what she’s talking about, even though she doesn’t realize it.

Her hips lift, taking me deeper into her body, and despite myself, I groan.

“It doesn’t hurt now,” she whispers. “Please, Eli. Please fuck me. I *need* you to fuck me.”

“I thought you hated me.”

I give a slow roll of my hips, testing how it feels. She’s so fucking tight. The intensity of how good she feels wrapped around my dick is incredible.

Her eyes flutter closed. “I do. I hate you so fucking much.” The word ends on a moan as I thrust deeper. “Hate you. Yes. So. Fucking. Much.”

My lips find her throat, and I bite my way up to her jaw. “Say it again.”

“I fucking hate you.”

“I don’t believe you.” Another thrust draws out another moan.

Her arms wind around my neck. “I hate you.”

“*Again.*”

Her back arches as I slam deeper. “I *fucking hate you.*” She almost screams the words.

I capture her lips, suck her tongue into my mouth and swallow her moans as I bury myself to the hilt into her body.

Her hands are everywhere. Around my neck, in my hair, sliding down my throat, wrapping around the padlock adoring my neck, over my back, digging into my ass. When our mouths break apart, I tangle a hand into her hair and pull her head back.

“Say my name.” I want to hear it on her lips. Need her to know it’s *me* fucking her. That it’s me making her feel this good.

“No.”

I tighten my grip. “Say my fucking name. Whose dick is inside you?”

She presses her lips together.

“Okay. If you want it that way.” I kiss along her jaw to her ear. “I’m going to make you come all over my dick, Princess, but not until you’ve said who’s fucking you. I’ll keep you on the edge all night long if I have to. I’ll stop before you come and leave you wanting. I’ll pull out and leave you empty and needy.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Then say my name.” My fingers find her clit, and she jerks against my touch, writhing and sobbing as I stroke and circle and flick and pinch, while my dick sinks into her body over and over again in a hard rhythm. “Do you want to come?”

She nods.

“Then say my name.”

“I fucking hate you.”

“I know. Say my name. Let me hear that hate, Princess.” I increase my thrusts, gritting my teeth against the urge to come. I will not fucking come until she does.

“I hate you.” Her back bows, lips parting as she gasps.

“Say. My. Name.”

“Fuck you. Fucking fuck. I fucking hate you, Eli.” My name spills from her lips in a throaty moan.

“Once more. Say my name once more.”

“Eli ... fuck ... Eli ... oh god, yes. Eli!” She’s chanting my name, moaning breathlessly and I can’t hold out any longer.

I smile against her cheek. “Good girl. You can come now.”

And she does, her curses filling the air, nails raking down my back, and I delight in it, savor it, *love* it as I find my own release.

“So fucking good,” I whisper. “You feel so good, Princess. I can feel you coming on my dick. Such a good fucking girl.”

CHAPTER 121

ARABELLA

I stir drowsily, and awareness comes back, I feel an unfamiliar ache low in my body. I'm draped over something warm and hard. I'm too comfortable and relaxed to move. My recollection of last night is hazy, and there's a dull throbbing in my head.

Urgh, I'm never drinking vodka again.

Eyelashes lifting, my gaze focuses on a face, and the false sense of safety I've awoken with drains away. Eli is sprawled beneath me, eyes closed, his breathing steady.

We're both naked under the sheets, and the reality of it rings alarm bells through my head.

You feel so good, Princess. I can feel you coming on my dick. Such a good fucking girl.

The memory of his words whisper through my mind. Other images and sensations join it. His lips on mine and the cool metal of his lip ring against my mouth. The feeling of being stretched and filled. Him moving over and in me. All the pleasure I'd been craving and starved for.

A whimper bursts from my throat, and I almost choke on my shock as I scramble out of the bed and away from him. "No, no, no."

Eli's eyes snap open, and he throws out a hand. "Princess?" His voice is thick, gravelly with sleep.

"What did you do to me?" I'm shaking so hard my teeth are chattering.

"Do to you?" he repeats in sleepy confusion.

My mind spins in chaos.

"I was drunk, and you—you took advantage of me, you bastard!" The accusation tumbles from my lips, anger merging with my agitation.

Eli's expression hardens. "Drunk? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Did you even use a condom?"

His eyes widen at my question, and I have my answer.

As I back away from the bed, I press a hand to my stomach, nausea rising.

"I hate you, Eli Travers, and I wish I'd never met you. You're nothing but a nasty little monster!"

Eli dives off the mattress. I dash into the bathroom and slam the door. I manage to lock it just as his fists hit the wood.

I turn and slide down the door, closing my eyes. Eli's face is imprinted in my brain. His tight, angry mouth, the hard lines of his cheekbones, and the slash of his eyebrows dipped in a glare over his stormy green eyes.

I had sex with my enemy.

My fucking evil stepbrother.

He took my virginity.

And from what I can remember of it through my hazy memories, I *liked* it.

My mind races. I can't breathe.

A fist slams into the bathroom door, and I jump. "Arabella!"

"G-go a-away." I press a hand to my mouth.

"Open the fucking door!"

I screw my eyes shut and press my hands over my ears. He's right behind the door, and I have nowhere to go.

"Eli?" Elliot's voice booms from somewhere outside in the house.

"Arabella, open the fucking door." Eli ignores his dad.

"*Eli*, get down here *right now*." The usually soft-spoken Elliot roars. His voice is closer.

"Give me a fucking second," Eli shouts back, then lowers his voice. "Arabella, come out and talk to me."

"Downstairs. My study. *Now*." Elliot's voice is so close he must be in my bedroom.

"I'll be back. We need to talk." There's another thump against the bathroom door, and then it goes quiet.

I lower my hands and listen for movement.

Silence.

I press my ear to the wood.

More silence.

I rise on shaky legs and ease open the bathroom door, peering through the crack. The room beyond is empty, and there's no sign of Eli. I step through, race across my floor, and close the door to my bedroom, and lock it. Turning back, I stare at the rumpled sheets.

Memories come in pieces, growing sharper as they roll through my head.

Make me stop.

Do you want to fuck me, Eli?

Do you want to stick your cock into my pussy?

I'd taunted him into having sex with me.

It's my fault.

I choke back something welling in my chest. It splits open my heart, breaking the organ still beating behind my ribs. Fresh tears tumble from my eyes to drip off my trembling chin.

Eli knows I was a virgin.

I need to talk to Miles. I need to tell him what happened. I need a friend.

I snatch up my phone and scroll to the message chat I have with Miles, only a notification on the school's social media app catches my eye.

Eli's accusation rings in my ears.

Did you offer to suck Jace's dick in return for a ride home? Or was just flashing your tits payment enough for him.

I click on it, and everything inside me freezes.

Arabella Gray—Whore of Churchill Bradley Academy.

The video beneath it begins to play. A blonde, blindfolded girl is naked on her knees. Her pink lips are stretched around the hard cock thrusting in and out of her mouth. Her breasts jiggling with her movements, she has her hand busy between her spread legs.

Me.

It's me.

One of the videos Sin recorded and uploaded onto the cloud for me to watch.

No, no, no.

Why would Sin do this to me?

My stomach heaves, and I vomit over the floor before I can get to the toilet. Panic and fear blow up in my head like a suffocating darkness.

This can't be happening. Everyone is going to see it. Oh God, what about the other videos? I can't go back to school now.

I can't catch my breath. The walls feel like they're closing in.

I'm trapped.

The urge to run takes me over.

I can't deal with this. It's all too much.

Opening the drawers of my dresser, I pull out some clothes and drag them on, then find a backpack in my closet. More clothes are stuffed inside, along with my diaries and phone. I don't stop to think as I slip into my sneakers and head for the door.

My heart is thumping in an erratic rhythm in my chest. The thought of bumping into Eli has me trembling and sick with dread.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

I snap my head toward the voice to find Kellan looking at me from a doorway.

The sleepy, questioning look on his face dissolves into concern. “What’s happened?”

Tears seep from my eyes, momentarily blurring my vision. Without a word, I bypass him and head for the staircase.

“Arabella?”

I run down the stairs.

I don’t know where I’m going but anywhere is better than here.

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CHAPTER 122

ELI

“Sit down, son.”

I flop down onto the chair, my gaze touching the empty bottle of vodka on his desk. “Bit early for that, isn’t it? Is your new wife driving you to drink already?” The dig is half-hearted. My attention isn’t really on my dad, but on the memory of Arabella’s white face as she ran from me.

My dad skirts his desk and sits down. “That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

“One of them?”

“I know you drink, son. I was eighteen once, too. And I know the last four years have meant you needed to grow up faster. I’m sorry about that. Sorry, you had to take on so much after your mom died, but it doesn’t excuse what you’re doing. What you’ve *done*.”

I yawn, scratching my jaw, acting like I have nothing to hide. “And what have I done?” *Fuck. Did he hear us last night?* Arabella had been loud, screaming at me.

I dismiss that immediately. If he thought I was hurting her, he’d have come into the room.

“If drinking an entire bottle of vodka isn’t bad enough—” He breaks off when the door to his study opens and Elena walks in.

She’s pale, makeup-less, her hair unbrushed, and wrapped in a silk robe. She looks more natural, less *plastic*, and much more similar looking to Arabella like this.

“I knew you hated me, Eli. I expected it.” Her voice is soft, and there’s a sheen to her eyes that makes me frown. “But Arabella? Why would you do something like that to her?”

So, they know we fucked last night. Or at least *think* we did. But unless Arabella says something, I can bluff my way through this.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I barely speak to your daughter.”

“Arabella is a good girl.”

My dick stirs at that. The words bringing back the memory of me whispering what a good girl she was while her body pulsed around me as

she came.

I shift on my seat, dropping my hands onto my lap to try and hide the hard-on I'm sporting. My dad pats Elena's hand as she moves to stand beside him.

"Let me deal with this, honey." His face is stern when he looks back at me. "Who did you get to seduce her?"

"I— What?" That isn't the question I'm expecting to hear.

"Don't do this, Eli. At least be man enough to admit to what you've done."

"I have no fucking idea what you're talking about."

My dad shoots to his feet. "I am your father, Eli. You will show respect when you speak to me!" The shouted words echo around the room.

I stare at him. I can't remember the last time he yelled at me. After six months of having to do *everything* to keep our home from falling apart while my dad grieved the death of my mom, he'd taken back the reins of the household but remained distant. There but not really interested in my day-to-day existence.

I tried for years after Mom died to get his attention. When all the good things didn't work—working hard at school, being the perfect son at home—I went in the other direction. I turned the water in the fountain in front of the house yellow. I got into fights. And when he still didn't react, I crashed his favorite car into a tree. Not even that made him shout at me.

Anger unfurls in the pit of my stomach. But now that he thinks I've done something to his new wife's daughter ... Now he wants respect?

"Where was my fucking father when I was fourteen and just lost my mom? Any respect I had for you disappeared then. Don't you fucking dare demand respect from me when you don't deserve it."

"Just tell me why. *Why* did you do this? What did Arabella do to make you want to humiliate her like this?"

He tosses his cell onto the desk between us. I frown down at it. There's a video on the screen.

"Press play, Eli." My dad's voice is grim.

What the fuck is going on here?

Reaching out, I tap the screen and go cold when my voice fills the room.

"You're doing so good, Kitten. If you could see how you look, you'd be proud of yourself. Just a little more to go. I'm going to pull out and then go deep. You can take it for me, can't you?"

Oh fuck.

“Who is he?”

“What?” I’m only half-listening, my eyes on the screen watching Arabella on her knees sucking my dick.

Fuck, she looks good like that. Her cheeks flushed with pleasure. I wonder if her eyes are dark with lust.

“Who did you pay to put her in that position so you could record it?”

My gaze flicks up to him, then back down to the video playing. “I didn’t pay anyone to do it.”

How the fuck does he have the video? Did Arabella give it to him? Was that what she was doing when she locked herself in the bathroom?

No, she doesn’t know it’s me ... does she?

“Eli, the school called a little while ago. A video ... *that* video ... was posted to the school’s social media site. A few minutes after it was released, they had a call from someone saying they were concerned for Arabella’s safety while she was here with you. They suggested someone take a look at your locker because they saw you putting something in there just before you left to come home.”

“What kind of something?” I hit stop on the video just as Kellan’s hands come into view, sliding around her body to cup her breasts.

“They found a cell phone full of obscene messages, videos, and photographs of Arabella. The cell appears to belong to her. No one knows who the other person is.”

“It wasn’t me. I didn’t upload it. I’m here. How the fuck could I have done it?”

Why the fuck would I publicize that video? It was for me and her.

“The school said you’d say that. They informed me that you’ve been exceptionally cruel to her since she joined Churchill Bradley, and that this is probably another of your attempts to try and ostracize her.”

There’s a rushing sound in my ears. I don’t hear the rest of what my dad says as I lurch to my feet and run from the room.

Has Arabella seen the video? I need to speak to her; tell her I *didn’t* upload them.

I take the stairs two at a time and almost slam into Kellan as he steps out of his room. I veer around him and reach out for Arabella’s door.

“She’s not there.” Kellan’s words stop me, and I swing to face him. His hands are shoved deep in his pockets and his expression is troubled. “She

called an Uber and ran out of here about ten minutes ago.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t speak to me.”

I push open her bedroom door. The room beyond is in chaos. Clothes are strewn around the room, the drawers on the dresser open, but my attention isn’t on that. It’s on the blood staining the sheets.

I scrub a hand down my face. For the first time in my life, I don’t know what to do.

“Well, silver lining.” Kellan pats my shoulder. “You got what you wanted.”

“And what’s that?” My voice is wooden.

“She’s gone. She’s out of your life.”

Except that isn’t what I want. It’s not what I want at all.

Continue Eli and Arabella’s story in Dare To Take -

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