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ER

VICE PRESIDENT

Sicko

USA Today & Wall Street Journal Best Selling Author

AMO JONES

He was my foster brother, he loved me.
Now he's a biker, he hates me.

Sicks



AMO JONES

He was my foster brother.

He swore to protect me.

He failed.

They all failed.

I'm an open box of passé photographs, snapped in chaste daylight, but filtered in sepia. I'm the past that he tried to forget; he was the future I needed. When he left four years ago, I screamed for him every night. But then it all stopped. My screams were suddenly muffled by cruelty, and further coaxed by pain.

But he has come back. He's not the cute big brother I had a furtive crush on, or the bad boy, rich brat that I hated to love.

He's the ruthless vice president of Wolf Pack MC, and he doesn't answer to Royce Kane anymore.

He answers to Sicko.

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Sicko
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Author Note

As most of you know, I don't usually have trigger warnings in my books. My main genre is dark romance, so I've come to expect my readers to just know that they're getting something dark and twisted once they flip the first page of an Amo Jones book.

This book is different. This is "my level" of Dark Romance. It is dark. It will have you squirm in some places, but not in the way you're probably used to or expect.

There are scenes within these pages that will be uncomfortable for you to read. I didn't water anything down. I wrote these characters as authentically as possible, because you, the reader, deserve that. I didn't sugar coat something to make it easier to digest, I drowned every scene in tequila, and just like a shot of Patron, it needs to be swallowed before you feel its affects.

Please don't take this warning lightly. These characters are like nothing I have written before, and this story is not one I've ever experienced.

This book is DARK, but every single word and scene that is in here is there for a reason. I'm not here for shock value. This is just a story that needed to be told in the art it has been displayed in.

If you're still here, I guess you're still wanting to read... so by all means...

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To my darkness.

Because the bitch really came out to play with this one.

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Acknowledgements

So I usually go ham on this section. Anyone would think I'd just won an Oscar, but *girl*, I'm tired.

This book sucked the soul out of me.

So, I just want to say thank you. To you, who is reading this book. Thank you for taking a chance on my world and allowing me to meddle with your mind for eight hours.

I'll buy you a drink when I meet you.

—A

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Royce

There was a woman.

She stood maybe a whole foot shorter than my six-three. I wanted to study her at close range to understand why she fascinated me so much, but the rustling of leaves that were falling around my feet distracted me enough to forget to ask questions. I was too busy thinking about the circumstances that led me to this point in my life.

Rock fucking bottom with no foundation to rebuild on.

I squeezed the gas hose tight. *Who the fuck was this woman?* An oversized hoodie hung off her fragile figure carelessly, her long dark hair flowing over her shoulders in tasteful waves. I couldn't get a good look at her face. She clearly did everything she could to hide it. Figured she wanted something since she hasn't moved from where she's staring, her body perceptibly turned toward me.

I nodded my head at her politely when I figured she wasn't going to stop gawking. I was fucking paranoid too. After what just happened and what we endured, I needed to get the fuck out of here fast.

I watched as her face peeked up behind the rim of her hoodie and her big green eyes zoned in on me. She glanced

into the back of my car before coming back to me. "You on the run, handsome?" Her voice was husky, as if she had smoked cigarettes her whole life. There was nothing suspicious about her at all, aside from the hoodie.

I chuckled. "Somethin' like that."

For a second, and I mean a very brief fucking second, darkness momentarily flashed over her eyes. Almost like a cloud that shaded over the sun on a clear summer day. As quick as it was there, it was gone.

The corners of her mouth tilted up in a smile. "Well, there's a place on the outskirts of downtown LA. The bar is called Patches." She assessed me. "No promises that they'd let a pretty boy like you stay, but you could always try."

I stood there with the gas pump beeping in the background, my mouth slightly open. I went into the store to pay for my gas and before I could thank her, she was already gone.

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Jade

I wish I could remember the day I was welcomed into the Kane family, but I was barely old enough to create vivid visions inside of my head. I was days old, dumped and left on the front doorstep of the local orphanage in a seedy area of San Francisco. I don't know much about what happened, not because the Kanes didn't want me to know, but because I've never wanted to ask. Being discarded as a baby by my parents is all I need to know. I was lucky that Mr. and Mrs. Kane were there the next day, wanting to find their brat of a son, a little brother that he could play with.

He got a sister instead.

Royce was three when I came home, and boy... was he not impressed about getting a sister instead of a brother.

Apparently, it took him forty-five minutes to talk to me, but then after that, we never stopped. Now I'm fifteen years old. You could say things have changed.

"Royce!" I yell at my frustrating brother as he circles the basketball court in our back yard, holding my phone up in the air. "Give it back to me right fucking now!"

He laughs so loud I want to shove my foot in his mouth. Royce has become increasingly annoying over the years,

but I know without a shadow of a doubt that if I need anything, it would be my big brother who I would ask first.

He must have stopped mid-run because I slam into him, my face squished against his back before falling to the ground. The blue sky swims above me amidst the yellow rapture of the sun.

An arm hooks around my mid-back, bringing me safely back to my feet. “Nah uh, you don’t get to die on me yet, Duchess. You still owe me that twenty dollars.”

I push off his chest, ignoring how hard his muscles are beneath his shirt.

“Give me my phone!” I place my hand out to him with the other on my hip.

“I heard that one of these little freshmen at school wanna take my sister out on a date...” he teases, and it’s then that I hear another voice behind me.

Orson’s whistle pierces through my eardrums. “Damn, someone new to the rules? Didn’t know that you can’t take little Miss Jade Kane out on a date without going through her big brothers?” Naturally, my annoying brother also has annoying friends who also annoyingly have claimed my—so-called—annoying ass. I’m untouchable at school. It’s not helpful when you wouldn’t mind being touched.

“He’s new. I will let him down nicely,” I plead with Royce, watching as his thumb hovers over my phone. He wouldn’t actually go through my phone, but if a text happened to come through while he was holding it, then I’m almost certain he would—*Ding*.

Fuck.

He tilts his head. I watch in sheer horror as his eyes fly over whatever words have popped up.

He glares at me. “Who is this little fuck?”

“What’d he say?” Orson asks, running his fingers through his dark, curly hair. Orson is a six-foot-six half-Mediterranean French, half-American basketball god, and one of Royce’s best friends. I’m not actually sure how they became so

close, since Orson is talented and managed to graduate from high school top of his class. Royce isn't dumb, but he can be an idiot. Yes, there's a difference. Orson also just got drafted into the NBA, which only adds to his ever-growing list of reasons why so many girls want him. I had a serious crush on him for the better part of my life, until I watched the girls he'd go for. All so beautiful. Way out of my league. His smooth brown skin and dark green eyes were killer, but when he flashed his pretty smile, all the girls dropped dead. He and Royce had that in common for sure, but that's about as far as the similarities go.

"He fucking said that he wants her to sneak out," Royce snaps, his fingers flying over my keyboard.

"Royce." I shake my head, scolding him. "I'm fucking fifteen. It's a lot less than what you were doing at my age and you damn well know it."

"Beside the point." He glares at me, his thumb hovering over the send button. "I lived through all of my shit so you didn't have to." He winks at me. "I'm a good brother like that."

"Royce," I whine, stomping the sole of my Vans against the concrete.

Orson bounces the basketball between his legs and aims up at the hoop, shooting from the three-point line.

"You guys will never stop picking on her." Another familiar voice comes from behind me again, and I turn to face the third boy to make up the triple threat—Storm Mitchell. Royce, Orson, and Storm have all been best friends since elementary school—which means yes, I've known them practically all of my life. Storm Mitchell was nothing like Orson or Royce. Storm was the smartest kid in our school and had an IQ to back it. He has never had a girlfriend—though plenty wanted him—and he always, *always*, had his laptop near. See, Stormy was going to cure the world of all their problems one day, he just had to create the right app to do so. Storm has blond hair, gray eyes—that

match angry skies—and his skin is as white as snow. His eyelashes are thick, his teeth straight. He is perfection in a strangely odd package. I loved Stormy, even if he never smiled. You get used to it after a while.

“Yes,” I say to Storm as he rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. “Royce is trying to scare a boy that I already said I would turn down.”

“Because said boy is trying to get you to sneak out after dark,” Royce sneers at me. The way his mouth curls has my mind drifting to how badly I want to punch him right in the face. “I’ll give you your phone back later.”

He turns to walk away from me.

“Royce!” I snap, but he doesn’t stop. “I mean it! I’m following you everywhere today until you give me my damn phone!”

Royce spins around and licks his lips. His lips have always been distracting. Bet they’re real fucking soft. I remember last year, Jessica Rueben slept with Royce, and then she went around the whole school talking about his—ahem—skills. She cried for months when he didn’t call her back after one night.

“Oh yeah?” He’s walking backward with an annoying smirk on his mouth. The fact that my brother is painfully attractive is beside the point and not at all helpful when it comes to him and I fighting. “Then I guess you’re coming on the boat.”

“Fuck.”

He disappears into the house and I turn to watch as Orson shoots yet another three-pointer. I didn’t want to go out on the boat with them today because I *did* actually want to sneak out tonight and meet up with Colson.

“You know, you gotta stop playing with the boy...” Orson teases, bouncing the ball with skill between his legs. His arms come up as he flicks his wrist, shooting the ball through the chain basket. “You’re dancing with the Devil.”

“The Devil doesn’t dance.” I stick my tongue out at him before storming back toward the house. Boat parties are something that all the rich kids throw and always end in a disaster. I hate going to them. I don’t drink. I don’t sleep around with boys—I’ll blame Royce for that—and for the most part, I’d consider myself a pretty good kid.

Especially when you compare me to my best friend, Sloane.

Jogging up the marble staircase and up to the second floor, I pause outside my bedroom door. There’s my room, and then Royce’s room right beside it. Two polar opposites, but neither could truly live without the other. His door is slightly ajar, and my anger has somewhat fizzled. Fighting with Royce does that to me—a lot.

Squeezing the handle, I push on it slightly until it swings open. Royce’s room is dark, moody, and trashy. The walls are the color of freshly spilled blood with silk white trimmings and his furniture is all tarnished aged wood. His bed looks straight out of an old Victorian porno, and speaking of porno, he has a good amount on his walls.

My cheeks heat as my palms itch. “Can I please have my phone back?”

He’s leaning against the headboard of his bed, shirtless, with one foot hanging over the bed and the other pulled up to his chest, his elbow resting on it. His eyes are on mine, hooded and glazed. This is who Royce is. Cocky, brash, and oh-so-fucking aware of every single thing he brings to the table, all to just eat *you*. He knew exactly what he did to the opposite sex, which is *exactly* why he did it. I just don’t know who he thinks he is trying it with me.

“Roy?” I mumble, pleading with myself to not allow my attention to fall down his chest. It’s no big deal, I’ve seen him naked a few times—for a few reasons. One being he hardly ever wears clothes, and two, we share a bathroom. “Blueberry Yum Yum” is playing low in the background from

a boom box in the corner of his room, which is typical. He has a deep love for Luda's old music.

He tilts his head. "Do you want to sneak out with him?" His tone is menacing but laced with fascination. He moves his hand over his hard muscles, right down to the button of his jeans. He flicks open the button before standing, tossing my phone down onto his bed.

I push off the doorframe an inch, ready to pounce.

"Well go on then, Duchess." His eyes come to mine, the soft swell of his lips curving over his freakishly straight teeth. He nudges his head, one hand sneaking into his pants. "Come get it."

My brain short circuits. I try to reason with myself why that shouldn't sound so dirty. *Brother*.

Taking two steps, I dive onto his bed until I land on my tummy, phone in hand and a smug smile of triumph on my mouth. That smile falters when suddenly his fist is in my hair as he tugs my head backward. I gulp, swallowing past the sudden tightness in my throat. He guides my head back by my hair, and I really, *really* hope no one walks in right now, because it would look like fifty shades of incest.

I'm peering up at Royce as he looks down at me from behind, his head still cocked. "Hmmm, now, see, I don't want to be thinking that some little fuck has this exact view right here." His eyes crawl down my back, landing on my ass. He stills. "That'd make me pretty mad." He comes back to my face, his tongue slipping out to swipe over his bottom lip. "And you know how I get when I'm mad, Duchess." His brows wriggle.

I slap his arm away and his head falls backward, a loud barking laugh spilling through the room. He clutches his tummy. "Sorry, Dutch. Won't do that again."

I roll off his bed. "You're a prick, and to answer your question." I glare at him once I'm back in the safe zone, i.e., near the door. "I wouldn't mind him looking at me like that."

His laughter stops and the temperature in the room falls to levels that could match an igloo.

He takes one step. "Take that back."

Now it's my turn to wriggle my brows. "Never!"

He launches at me, but I'm too fast, spinning on my heels and screaming as I take the two steps to my bedroom door. I slip into my room, but when I try to slam the door closed, his arm snakes in, stopping it.

I yelp again. "Royce!" My heart is jumping around in my chest, heat flushing through my body. "I'm sorry!"

He flies forward, his arm hooking around my back and his heavy body falling onto mine. I land on my bed with a thud, the puffy yellow comforter serving as a landing zone.

"Royce!" I shove at his chest, a laugh vibrating through me.

He brings his hands to my wrists and pins my arms above my head. "Tell me you won't fuck him."

Finally, my laughing subsides, and my eyes collide with his. He's so close that I can feel the heat radiating off the tip of his nose.

"What?" I ask, searching his eyes. "Why would you even say that?"

The muscle in his jaw tenses. "Just promise me, Duchess." His tone is soft, but his voice is cloaked in pain. Why does this matter to him so much?

"Royce," I snort, searching his face. From his soft tanned skin to his sharp-edged jawline. His skin is free from tattoos, but he always talks about getting ink. When he doesn't smile, or smirk, or even look away from me, I shake my head. "I promise, but Roy, you don't have to worry about that." I widen my eyes at my invasive brother.

"Oh really." His blue eyes work their way down my neck to my breasts. He comes back to meet mine. "I beg to fucking differ."

"Royce..." I warn.

"Jade," he whispers, parroting my tone.

"You don't have to worry about that. Like *at all*." I widen my eyes again, hoping he would catch what I'm meaning.

"What, you don't think I know that you're a virgin?" Finally, the worry lines fade and a smirk creeps onto his mouth. "Baby, who the fuck do you think scares them off?" My smile drops, but before I can answer him, his weight is off me and he's heading for the door. "Be ready in two hours and leave Sloane behind." Yeah, he knows for sure that I won't be leaving Sloane behind.

He slams my door behind himself and I flip him off while flicking through my contacts list on my phone. I open a message to Sloane, but before I can type out the words, a text pops up.

Royce: I mean it. Don't invite her. I will throw her off the boat.

I shake my head, rolling onto my belly while scrolling through my music playlist. I connect via Bluetooth to my sound dock, pushing play on "Sacrifice" by Jessie Reyez.

Me: I need a friend with me.

Royce: Since when have you ever needed a friend, and besides, you don't need friends when you got big brothers. One hour and fifteen minutes.

I toss my phone onto my bed and cuss under my breath. He's right, but he also doesn't understand girls. Especially girls like Sloane, who will lose her shit and see it as a complete betrayal in the trust factor.

Moving across the room, I begin gathering everything that I will need. In short, I actually love going out on the boat, I would just rather go out when the sole purpose of it isn't getting blackout drunk with idiots. Although, I did manage to get my phone back. I could just skip the boat trip and run out now...

My door swings open, hitting the back of the wall in my room. Royce stands at the threshold, smirking. "Don't even think about it."

Sighing, I swoop up my bikini. "Give me a few minutes." Shutting the bathroom door behind myself, I slip into a

pastel pink two-piece and shorts. I don't bother with a shirt since my boobs aren't exactly spilling out. Pulling open the last drawer under the counter, I take out my little white scarf and wrap it behind the back of my head, tying the rest of my long brown hair onto the top of my head.

"Hurry up!" Royce bangs on my door, and I jump, flipping him off.

"I'm coming!" Quickly grabbing a towel, I make my way into my room, swinging the bathroom door open. "Whose boat are we taking?"

Royce's eyes fall down my body. Other girls would blush from having the attention of Royce Kane, I don't want it. Why? Because he's only summing up what he doesn't like. Bet he's already decided that I need to wear a burlap sack. His lashes fan out over his high cheekbones as his eyes hit my feet before traveling back up to mine. "It gets cold on the water, you know that."

Scooping up a hoodie, I shove past him. "Fine."

Royce finally follows behind me as we make our way downstairs to the front door. We're heading out when Mr. Kane comes out from the kitchen.

"You kids taking out Green Stone?" Mr. Kane asks both of us, but his eyes remain on Royce. Green Stone is the name of Royce's gloss black and jade green Nautique G25 aka, his baby.

Mr. Kane's eyes meet mine, blue ocean flecks so deep they could swallow me whole. For the most part, I don't have much of a relationship with Mr. Kane, and when it's just he and I, the atmosphere is somewhat tense. Either he didn't want to adopt me, or maybe I simply wasn't what he wanted.

"Yeah, it's been a minute." Royce nudges Dad with his other shoulder. "Wanna come? Or are you getting too old for the board?"

Dad shoves him back, chuckling while tensing his bulging arm muscles. "I can bench press you, Orson, and that little

shit Storm." His eyes come back to mine. "Throw Jade on there too."

Royce chuckles, his hand grabbing mine. He slides me behind him. "Nah, Jade might fall and hurt this pretty little head."

Dad laughs, disappearing back into the kitchen while we head to the ten-car garage. The sun pelts down over my skin, not a cloud in the sky to interrupt it as Royce flicks open the power box to open the garage door. From what I've been told, this home has been in the Kane family for a few generations, only added to and modified on its way through the years. The garage was Dad and Mom's addition. They needed it when Royce found he loved all things fast, including cars and boats, and what Royce wants, Royce gets. Of course, that included me too. When I was ready, I could take my pick on what car I wanted, but it never felt right, so I dragged my feet with it. Mom has said I'll be taking the BMW, whether I want it or not.

Royce tosses his keys into the Ford Raptor and I jump up to the passenger side, shutting the door behind me.

Pulling out my cell, I flicked off a message to Sloane, who was more than likely going to be really pissed at me for not bringing her with me, but Sloane is friends with everyone. She'll busy herself with something else tonight.

I've been dragged into going out on the boat. Sorry! See you later?

Leaning to turn the key over in the ignition, I flick through my playlist as Royce jacks the boat up. Fifteen minutes later, Orson and Storm are slipping into the back and we're on our way. I hit play on Tech N9ne, needing his aggressive tone to mellow out my thoughts. Cranking down my window and kicking my feet onto the dash, Orson hands me a wine cooler from the back.

I shake my head. "What is that? Purple Jack Daniels?"

Orson pops off the lid and takes a swig. "Yeah, pretty sure you'd like it."

Royce squeezes my leg from the driver's seat, and I watch as the sun catches behind his head. He has his ball cap flipped backward, his lips glistening from his tongue being pressed to the top only minutes ago. His two dimples distract me for a split second as we pull into the harbor where a few people are gathered from school. Royce, Orson, and Storm rule over the school like gods, but they're different. They're not assholes, or entitled, or even a little bit snobbish. You would expect them to be. Orson is the son of Larken, who is number four on Forbes Billionaires, and that's shortly followed by Bessen, Storm's mother who is snug at number ten, and then Royce, or I should say Royce and me, whose father is number two. You would expect them to be this way. Assholes who carelessly treat everyone like shit, but they don't. They take care of Stone View High as if it's their home. They are all good people.

All of them.

I slip out of the pickup just in time for Orson to toss me over one shoulder, slamming my door closed behind us.

"Put me down!" I bang on his muscled back, but it's no use. Everyone is well accustomed to seeing me be manhandled by my three brothers, that no one even so much as bats an eye. The girls who do notice are the ones who hover with envy. Every girl wanted these boys, and at times they lucked out. Especially with Royce and his rogue dick, but they never last. They never stayed, and they never got a second ride.

"Sin, put me down, please! I did what Royce wanted! I came!"

I can feel Orson's shoulders shaking beneath my weight. "I know, but you see, we have a teeny problem..."

"And what's that?" I ask, though my eyes are swinging all over the place to take in who is all here. I can see a lot of people sticking to their crews, with almost everyone already parked up in the water. The bay had rafts stretching out long, with boats upon boats parked in every spot. Music was

pouring out of them, with sounds of glass bottles clinking and laughter. The coast guard hated all of us, and depending on who was on duty, they usually just leave us alone.

"Well, we have to make sure everyone here knows that you're spoken for."

I roll my eyes. I always got stuck coming out. Although I wasn't old enough to get my boat license yet, I know how to operate one and I never drink, so it's convenient for all three of them to have me here. Usually, Sloane would cash in on it too.

"Duchess!" Royce calls out, whistling.

I tap at Orson's back again and he finally—fucking finally—places my feet back to solid ground. "What?"

Royce grins at me from over his arm as he continues to reverse the boat into the water from the ramp. "Might need you to hop on and scream some orders." People don't even breathe at Royce's banter, but I roll my eyes and slip off my flip-flops, tossing all of my things into the back of the boat. I move through the water and fling myself up inside from the little ladder at the end. Royce continues to back up into the water until I stop him. He busies himself with unlatching the boat from his vehicle when Orson, Storm, and a couple of other girls climb onto the boat.

I grind my teeth, swinging my bag under the hood of the boat where there's a bed, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Royce jumps on last, throwing his shirt at my face.

"Smile, Dutch." He leans forward, pressing the cushion of his thumb against my bottom lip. "Wouldn't want this pretty little face to stay like that."

"Royce!" Annette Bird, aka Royce's current plaything, waves him over to the front seat where her, Bianca, and Natasha Daniels are perched, bikinis tied and bodies oiled.

I run my tongue over my teeth. "You know, I really wish I just stayed home." And maybe text played with Robbie. I

would have preferred that than sit here and watch all three of these boys play with their latest Barbie dolls.

"Aww." Royce ruffles my hair. "You gonna act like you don't want to go out on the board?" I couldn't even fight my smile. He gestures over to the neon green wakeboard. "Saddle up."

I dance over to the back of the boat and latch myself on to it. I'm strapped in, Royce has Cypress Hill "Rockstar" pounding through the speakers and we're almost at our favorite spot (which is pretty much in the ass crack middle of Ocean Tavern), I throw up the hang loose sign and toss myself backward. The water cracks from beneath my weight and I feel the rush from nature sink through my fingertips, pumping into my veins. I've always been an outdoor girl. Never the girly girl, so I guess in a sense, Royce did sort of get the brother that he wanted in me. At least for now. It's wearing off with age. I still don't like pink.

I resurface to the top with a smile on my lips, swiping my long brown hair out of my face.

"You little fucking shit!" Royce yells, flipping me off from the boat.

"What'd I do? I always go off like that!"

He waves me off, his mouth in a flat line. Tense bastard. He gets grumpy when we're about to shred, well, especially when I'm about to go shredding. I gaze around us to see another four or five boats parked up, with others climbing off, swimming, drinking, and chilling. This is our usual convey. Instead of cars, we all take the boats out. It's like an extracurricular activity for the rich and bored.

"Duchess." Orson blows me a kiss while tossing the handle into the water. "Try not to break a bone this time?"

"Stop jinxing her!" Storm shoves at Orson, leaving his shirt unbuttoned but keeping it secured. Storm never goes without a shirt. He doesn't talk about it and Royce said I'm never to ask, but he always wears a shirt. Even in the water. Even shredding.

I take the handle and throw up hang loose again, my tongue sticking out at Royce.

“Because you look extra mischievous today, I’m going to go slow!” he yells, the boat slowly pulling away from me. I feel the tug on the rope and chuckle.

“Oh yeah? I’ll remember that when it’s your turn!”

“Why can’t you be like all the other girls and sit up on my shit and look all pretty, huh?” Royce throws me a smirk. I can’t answer him now because he’s too far away. He’s right. I am the only girl who shreds with the guys, but it’s their fault. They created the monster and then asked why I bite. The boat kicks up speed and I’m up, the board skating over the water like butter. Once he picks up more speed, I twist to do a few surface tricks, a relaxed smile on my face. I love being out on the water. The reason why I didn’t want to come today wasn’t because I didn’t want to go out on the board, but because I didn’t want to deal with the partying that happens afterward at Orson’s cave.

Yes, his actual cave.

Royce turns the boat fast and I kick up, landing a Big Worm. We spend another twenty or so minutes while I do all of my tricks and exude my energy, before I’m being pulled back into the boat with a frown on my face.

Orson picks me up from under my arms. “Stop being sad, girl. You know damn well you get more time than any of us.”

“This is true.” I chuckle, unzipping my life jacket and leaving me in my two-piece. I dry out my hair with a towel, just as Royce hands me a bottle of water.

“You good?”

Annette comes up behind him, wrapping her skinny arms around his stomach.

“Yup.” I nod, heading to the front to sunbathe on the hood. The rest of the day burns away as they all take turns on the board while Storm throws out his fishing line. The sun is sinking behind the clouds in the sky when Royce finally cracks open his first drink.

I know that I shouldn't, but I'm jealous. This once. Sure, I've never actually been drunk before, and sure, Royce would never allow me to have too much alcohol, but a girl can dream, right?

I make my way to the front of the boat and we lead the convoy toward Mount Aetos. Orson's last name is Aetos, so yes, Orson's mountain. It's just a plain old island in the middle of the ocean, where his parents own a billion-dollar mansion built on top of boulders. Because Orson's home is where you have to get to by boat, he usually crashes at Royce's—hence the basketball court. The cave curves off of the island in an arch before you arrive right on the white sand beach. The water is still, motionless, and the sand is infinitesimal enough to sink between your toes.

We anchor up just as the sun has set in the sky. Storm pulls out his archery set, lighting the tip of the stick and aiming it to the pile of bush wood on the shore. He releases his finger and the bonfire explodes in a surge of flames.

Everyone at school knows about the weekend hangout spot and who attends. It's exclusive, but that's not because people aren't invited, it's only because not everyone has a boat and you can only fit so many on one. When Orson brings his dad's out, then that's a whole different story. The multi-million-dollar power yacht named *Vegas* is exactly what its name implies. It's a whole party on a yacht themed and painted in Sin City. Orson's father is the Greek to his American mother who is no longer with us. Since his mom's passing, his father hardly ever occupies this house, leaving Orson alone.

Clutching my flip-flops and hoodie, I slip into the water and make my way to shore, needing to be as far away from Royce as possible while he has Annette all over him. I can't deal with it, but I don't know why. I don't know why my stomach convulses every time she puts her hand on him, because he doesn't put his on her. The PDA is always her, not him. I don't even know why I'm thinking about that.

"Hey!" A girl with long curled hair and a couple of piercings in her face waves me over. She's in cut-offs, a plaid shirt, and *are those Doc Martens?* I love Docs, but near the water?

"Hi!" I make my way to where she's seated alone, smoking a cigarette. She's gorgeous, that much is obvious, but I've never seen her here before. Ever, actually. Not even at school.

"Are you new?" I ask, taking a seat on one of the stumps that are surrounding the raging fire. It crackles in the background, warming the side of my cheek.

She nods her head, raising the bottle of champagne. "Sure am, and I gotta say..." She looks around, pausing every couple of seconds. "There's not a girl that I see here that I would want to be friends with."

I chuckle, shoving my arms into the sleeves of my Calvin Klein hoodie and zipping it up. I'm glad I slid into my black short shorts earlier, but now I wished I had brought some skinny jeans. I usually head up to the main house when things get rowdy down here—by Royce's orders—so I rest in the fact that I won't have to freeze my tits off for too long. "They're not all that bad."

"Sure they are..." the girl says, flicking off the ash on the tip of her smoke. She sticks her hand out in front of herself. "I'm India, you're?" she asks, and I look from her face to her hand. I'm not one to make friends. That's not because I don't want to, that's because no one wants to make friends with me. Never understood why, and by the time Sloane figured out I was a weird one, it was too late, we were already friends.

I take India's hand in mine. "Love the name. People say I look part Indian. I've been told that all of my life, so now I sort of tell people that I have a grandparent who is from India. Makes me feel badass."

India laughs, her head falling back before her eyes come to mine. "Yeah, I sort of see it. You have the tanned skin,

dark hair, and—" She leans closer to me until the tips of our noses touch. "What color are your eyes?"

I inch back a little, somewhat thrown off by her intrusion in my bubble. "Ah, green. My name's Jade."

"Wow! That's a cool name!"

"Well, we can swap." My hands dive into the pockets of my hoodie, my eyes going to the flame. Music spills out loudly from behind me and I don't have to turn my head to know what's going on. The Tiki bar will be in full swing, the fairy lights will be switched on, and the graffiti that Royce sprayed over the rocky mountain wall will be on full display for everyone to admire. My eyes fly up to the art, all shades of the color green. Lime, forest, ocean, turquoise, *jade*. The numbers 2000 tagged in graffiti font. The year I was born and adopted into the Kane family. I don't think anyone else notices the significance of it except for Orson and Storm. Every time I see it, my heart skips multiple beats. There's never been a shadow of a doubt of what I mean to Royce and I him. Love is love, but when it's unconditional, it's for life.

"No way, you suit your name. So, what are you doing here?" India asks, butting out her smoke in the sand. "No offense, but you look a little bit younger than everyone else here too."

Just as I open my mouth, Orson's hands are on my shoulder and he's squeezing roughly. "Duchess, you making friends?"

"She is." India smirks up at Orson. This is where it happens. They get excited because they see my brothers and then suddenly, I'm back to square one and it's just me and Sloane. Most girls my age are opportunists. They see my brothers and they decide they like them more than they like me.

India wipes her hand and puts it out to Orson with a friendly smile. "I'm India."

Orson side-eyes her just as Royce and Storm come up behind him. "Orson."

They all go through meeting India, and I watch as her eyes flick around, disinterested in any of my brothers. *Weird*, I thought to myself. Not what usually happens.

Maybe India is different?

The bonfire heats up, just as Royce slips in beside me, his arm hooking around my waist. He nuzzles his nose into the crook of my neck, balancing his red cup in his other hand. "Mmmm, you always smell this good?" His voice is deep, vibrating over my flesh and hitting every nerve on its way out.

"So, you like them a little older?" India raises an eyebrow at the two of us.

"What?" My eyes widen in horror. I shove Royce away from me. He chuckles so loudly his head has to tip back. "No! He's my brother."

Confusion flashes over India's face. "Really?" The corner of her lip curls, not in disgust, but shock.

"Yes, foster brother, but still brother."

"Foster brother is a synonym for loophole, just sayin'," Royce teases, flashing his tongue cheekily.

I roll my eyes. "Ignore him, he's obviously drunk. Or high."

Royce laughs, just as Annette comes up behind him, her arms hooking around his neck as she leans down.

"And you?" India asks me, cocking her head. "Do you drink or smoke?"

"No," Royce answers for me, his eyes boring into mine. "She's too young."

I grit my teeth. It's not that I'm not used to his overbearing nature, or that I'm not used to him doing this same shit with me every single time we party, but it's that every time he does it, it wears on my patience.

"She's fifteen, not twelve." India rolls her eyes and before I can argue back to Royce, a red cup is in my hand,

alcohol sloshing over the rim, spilling over my hand. “One won’t hurt you, and you know you got it from me, not some shady motherfucker at the bar.”

Royce leans forward to take the cup out of my hands when I pull away from him, eyebrows raised in challenge. “You know, she’s sort of right. I mean, just how much trouble can I really get into when I have all three of my big, overprotective brothers here to scare everyone away?”

“Duchess...” Royce warns, his jaw set.

“Leave her be,” Annette whines, kissing on Royce’s neck. “No one touches her anyway.” She laughs, but Royce whacks her hand away from him.

“Royce, just this once, and I’m not asking for permission.” I narrow my eyes in challenge. I know he wants to fight, and being Royce, he wouldn’t back down from it for the sake of everyone watching. He doesn’t give a shit. But before he can say anything else, I turn my back on both of them and face India.

“So,” I murmur, sipping on the—what I’m guessing—is bourbon and Coke, but also not really interested in drinking now that my point is made. “How come I’ve never seen you at one of these?”

India chuckles, but her face falls before she can cover it. I watch as the warmth from the scorching flames sparks an orange hue over her otherwise pale cheeks. “I guess I’m new. I start my senior year on Monday, actually. Not too excited about it.”

Placing my full cup down onto the sand, I snuggle into my hoodie. “Stone View isn’t bad. It’s about the equivalent to Hogwarts, only everyone is muggles and instead of Hagrid, we have Hagdid. I shit you not, our headmaster’s name is Hagdid.”

We both burst out laughing as we slip into small talk. After trading cell numbers with India, I stand from my seat and swipe off the sand that’s on my butt. “I’ll text you on

Sunday, maybe we can meet up. You can meet Sloane. You'll get along disturbingly well."

India gazes up at me, the depth to her hazel brown eyes holding so many secrets. I get the feeling that she has lived a thousand lives. What would she be doing at Lake View?

"Sure!" She winks at me. "See ya later, Little J."

Hated that name, loved her.

Weaving through the sea of drunk bodies, I keep my head down. I'm almost at the beginning of the steep track that connects the beach to the back yard of Orson's house when a hand connects to my arm.

"Royce." I turn to face him, expecting some cheeky smirk and maybe some scolding for drinking, but instead his eyes are focused on me, searching my body.

"You wanna go home?"

I run my tongue over my teeth. "It's late. We can just crash in the pool house like always." As we've gotten older, our connection or bond has become stronger, and that's a testament for how strong it is because when we first laid eyes on each other, we were done. It was as though the universe just fucking shifted anytime we were around each other after that. He embedded himself into my heart and I sewed my name across his limbs. We fight a lot, but we love hard and when it comes to him and me, one cannot exist without the other.

Royce Kane is undeniably my best friend.

He nods his head toward the ocean. "I've only had a couple. I can drive." His hand slips down from my arm and his fingers intertwine with mine. At the sudden connection, it's as though my heartbeat pulses for the first time ever. Blood rushes through my ears and my cheeks flush hot. I'm thankful—so fucking thankful—for the blanket of the night. "Come on, Dutch..." I'm fifteen, he is eighteen. I never feel uncomfortable around him in that sense—ever, but—*wait*. Wait, the fuck on a minute. Why am I sizing up our ages?

Shivering with the sudden repulsiveness of what just passed through my mind, I retract myself from him and fling my arms around my torso protectively.

As if that could help.

As if Royce wouldn't just tear everything and anything down to get to what he wants if he needs to.

"I don't want to deal with the questions. I'll just go up to the room." It wasn't all a lie, because I truly couldn't be bothered with all the raised eyebrows and questions from people who would see us leave on Green Stone.

"Fuck them," he says, shrugging.

I open my mouth, deciding we could just stay out on the boat instead of in the pool house, when skinny fingers and red nails come into view, spreading out over Royce's stomach. Annette gazes at me from behind his arm. "Hey, baby, I'm tired, can we go on your boat like you said?"

My stomach tightens as all the air is being sucked out of my lungs.

He fucking invited her onto the boat before me. Undiluted rage simmers below my skin as I spin around and begin running up the stairs that lead to the main house. Usually I take these slow since there are so many of them and the view going up is beautiful to take in, but I want to get as far away from them both as quickly as possible. Five minutes later and I've reached the top, but I don't stop. I run across the well-manicured lawn, dodging the illuminated pool and head straight for the door of the pool house. Sliding it open, I slip inside and slam it closed, quickly locking the door once I'm in. My heart is beating in my chest, tears clinging to the back of my eyes. *Why the fuck am I crying?* Deep down I know I'm being unreasonable, and to be fair, Royce is always with someone, prancing around. Why is it different now? Why am I beginning to feel different toward him?

Removing my hoodie and tossing it onto the floor, I swipe away my unreasonable tears and drag my ass to the other

side of the room, where my single bed awaits.

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Jade

An arm hooks around my waist, pulling me into a hard, warm body. I already know who it is before I've turned to look. I could smell him in any room. Without thinking, I wriggle into his embrace when my butt pushes against his crotch. He's hard—rock fucking hard—and I know that everything inside of me is saying this is wrong. We've never been in this situation—ever. He has slept in the same bed as me, but we were kids then. We aren't now. His fingers spread out over my tummy and I hold my breath, afraid that if I breathe, it will be too loud. Too fast. Too desperate. Too obvious what he does to me. His fingers move down as his lips press against the nape of my neck.

"You're a fucking brat, you know that, right?" His voice is low, yet distant. It doesn't matter, because my hips begin seeking his touch as if they've been reunited for the first time in centuries. He stops my movement at once, forcing me still while pressing his palm over my lower abdomen. I swallow past my tight throat, trying so hard to ignore the outline of his hardness pressing against my butt. *Oh fuck.* Oh fuck, oh fuck. There would be no going back after this. *I don't care.* He usually does, but his teasing always stops

before the touching. We've never touched, never kissed. Never done anything that would cross that line, except maybe light flirting that I mostly think I'm imagining.

He rolls me onto my back as his hand covers my mouth. He pulls my legs until I'm spread wide. The outline of his hair is all I can see in the darkness of the room. We're still in the pool house. *Did he chase me?*

"You have to be quiet, Duchess." His head turns and I follow his eyesight to where Annette is sleeping peacefully on the floor snuggled in blankets. He snuck into my bed while she slept. I don't care.

Nodding my head, he loosens his grip slightly, and that's when I feel the heat of his chest against mine. He grinds his hips into me slowly, sliding his hand away from my lips as his come down to mine. My chest turns to fire, my belly igniting along with it at the connection of our lips. His tongue licks mine with the same possessiveness that I always knew he had as his head dips beneath the covers.

"Roy!" I whisper-yell, reaching for his hair. He pushes my hands away and slips my panties to the side. I really should have worn pants. "R—" His warm mouth covers the tip of my clit, his tongue sliding up and circling the nub.

"Oh my f—" One of his hands is back on my mouth as his tongue laps over my clit. It takes two seconds for my legs to shake and my core to clench as my orgasm ripples over my innocent body in waves. He moves up my body, stretching my legs wide.

"You wanna do this?" He brushes his nose with mine, his lips grazing slightly. "There's no going back."

"I don't want to go back. Take it."

"Why?" he asks, his fingers flexing near my collarbone. His thick tip is pressing against my wet entrance, and all it would take would be one little... I push my hips up and his cock is an inch inside, stretching my tight walls. I flinch. "Why, Duchess?" he whispers against my lips.

I wrap my arm around his neck and nibble on his bottom lip. “Because I’d only ever want it to be you.” He slides inside of me at once, filling me to the brink until I feel my soul seep out of my body and a scream rip out of my lips—

“Duchess!”

Orson? Someone is shaking my shoulders.

“Wake up! Now!”

“What?” My eyes pop open and I’m met with the darkness of the room bar one lamp. Orson is standing over me, his hoodie thrown over his head. “Royce got into a fight with Derek Chambers, we’re going back to your house.”

“What?” I ask, propping up onto my elbows. “Why does it matter if he got into a fight with Chambers!” Fucking idiot boys, and speaking of idiots... that dream was—no comment.

“It matters because Royce fucked him up good and almost killed him. We’re leaving—now.”

“What?” I fly out of the covers so fast and start yanking on my hoodie. “Where’s Royce?” I swipe my hair out of my face and zip it up. He almost killed him? This is bad. Royce doesn’t need another legal stint.

“Royce is fine, he’s already on the boat. Chambers barely got a hit in.”

I didn’t ask why Orson was here and Royce wasn’t. I swipe up my phone and push it into my pocket before we make our way back down to the beach. People have long since left, and the only boat that’s docked in is Royce’s. There are a few people scattered across the shore, asleep, but for the most part, it was just a fucking mess. I feel bad for Orson’s cleanup crew.

Picking up my pace, I run across into the water and jump into the boat, when I see Royce lying on his back on one of the sofas with his arm covering his face. One leg is hanging over the chair while the other is perched up.

“He’s asleep. I’ll drive.” Orson begins untying us when I start up the boat. Storm walks out from below with a pale

face.

"What's wrong?" I ask Storm, who looks more uncomfortable than usual.

He shakes his head. "He almost killed him."

I run my tongue over my lip, turning my head over my shoulder to cast a glance at Royce, who still hadn't moved. I'd like to say that I didn't think Royce had it in him to seriously kill someone, but if you give him something worth dying for, he will kill for them.

I clear my throat, my thoughts on the dream I had just minutes ago. It all felt too real. Way too real. Seeing him so soon after the vivid images that are still fresh in my head is raising goose bumps over my skin and making my heart beat faster than it ever did before.

Storm nudges his head over his shoulder. "I'll drive. Go do your thing." I release the steering wheel and inch backward until I'm back near Royce. The inside and outside of the boat is lit up from the neon LED lights, deep blue hues accentuating his figure. His dark jeans, military-style boots tied loosely at his feet, and the hoodie that's pulled over his head.

"Are you gonna stand there and stare or start yelling so we can get this over with?" He shifts his arm above his head and I finally get the first peek of his chiseled high cheekbones and soft lips. Lips I felt in my dream. *All too real*. Why the fuck did that feel so real. "Come here." The way his voice wraps around those simple words is the very reason why my heart drops to my stomach. His tongue flicks out and dampens his bottom lip. "Now, Duchess..."

Finally, I take a seat beside him, blowing out a steady breath of air. His arm hooks around my waist and he yanks me down onto his chest, while keeping me to his side, both arms now wrapping around me as he pulls me in close and buries his nose in my hair. From a distance, if you weren't in our circle, it would look intimate, and it definitely feels it to me right after that dream, but I know without a shadow of a

doubt that to Royce, it would just be a big brother hugging his younger sister type hug.

“Royce?” I whisper, playing with the gold curb chain that hangs around his neck.

“Mmmm?” he growls out.

I chew on my bottom lip nervously. “What happened with you and Chambers?”

I feel his body turn rigid beneath me, and I almost feel guilty for bringing it up. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

But I do worry. I worry a lot.

“You almost killed him?” I press up from his chest, bringing my eyes level to his. The outline of his features are hard, sharp enough to cut me in half. I’m momentarily trapped in the twisted knots of his gaze, before my eyes drop to his mouth. Soft lips shaped by hard edges.

Without even thinking, my tongue runs over my mouth.

He sucks in an audible breath, and my focus comes crashing back to his. His eyes are on my mouth now, thick brows pulled in.

“Roy?”

He releases his breath as a slow, menacing smirk crawls over his mouth. “Mmmm, you’re just a bit of fucking mischief, huh, Duchess.” He moves closer until his lips are grazing against my earlobe. “You might wanna be careful with the way those pretty little eyes look at me.”

I flinch, crawling off his body. Just as I’m back on my feet, his hands come to mine and I find myself watching his face again. It’s painful how perfect Royce is. I’m sure I always knew it, only things are starting to shift into an area that I’m not sure I’m comfortable with addressing right now.

“Hey!” He yanks on my fingers and my eyes catch his grazed knuckles. Bloodied and spoiled with cracks as deep as the ones forming in my heart. “I was joking, Duchess, you know that.”

"What do you mean?" I murmur, swiping my unruly hair out of my face as the boat slows, pulling up to the dock.
"What part?"

I can hear Dad cursing in the background the second we're anchoring in. Royce winks. "You tell me." He jackknives up from his position, clutching his stomach. "This is going to for sure give Dad a hernia," Royce banters, and just as he's walking past me, I catch the dampness on his stomach. My hand flies out to his arm, halting him. He's big enough to push me away, but he doesn't.

"Royce..." I whisper, pulling him backward.

He staggers back, and his face pales. "What's the matter, Duchess? Gonna finally kiss me now that I'm dying?"

Before I can register his words or take them in, he falls against me, pushing me to the ground. There's yelling in the background, with Mom and Dad both diving into the boat. Everything is a blur, my world is spinning. Someone is screaming so loud that my ears bleed, and it's not until I'm tearing off his hoodie to see the stab wound in his stomach that I figure out that, that someone screaming...

is me.



Jade

My world is caving in around me. I've been rocking back and forward in the waiting room since we got here. They still haven't let us see Royce, and he's apparently still in surgery. Running my hands through my hair, I continue to rock furiously, attempting to talk myself down from the outburst I can feel rising.

It wasn't anyone's fault. *No one can stop Royce when he's in a rage.* Except when I think those words, I know that's a lie. There is one person who could have stopped him.

Calm him.

Me.

He wanted to leave, and I left him down there all for what? My pride? Because I wanted to sulk instead of snatching him away from a girl I know he doesn't give a fuck about?

The strong stench of metal fills my nostrils and I bring my hands down to my face. Red streaks of blood crust over the palms of my hands, trapped between my fingers. My hands shake as I furiously take in every single droplet of blood.

Royce's blood.

I fly to my feet and tear off my hoodie, and then look down at the t-shirt I had underneath, only seeing his stained blood smeared over that too. His life was right there. On me. Stained. What if this is all I have left of him? I tear off my shirt and throw it onto the ground with the hoodie.

"Jade, sweetheart." My mom comes closer to me, her hand on my arm. I flinch away from her, the tears in my eyes blurring my vision. I don't even feel them drop down my cheeks anymore, because I'm so numb. *So, so, so numb.* "Your father will take you home to shower and change. There's nothing you can do here..."

I shake my head, my dry hair scratching against my shoulders.

"Duchess..." Orson says, and a warm hoodie comes over my shoulders. "Put this on and I'll get Mom to wash your clothes." Before he can take my discarded clothes, I lean down and scoop them up, running to the bin and tossing the pile inside. Pain grips at my heart again, injecting me with its ugly poison and refusing to let go. I don't want it to either, because the guilt is unbearable.

"I should have gone. I should have listened to him and came back to the boat." Just as the words leave my lips, Storm is beside me protectively. Officers amble into the room and I watch through blurred vision as Dad stands and addresses them, though we don't ever have to worry. Kyle Kane has the entire fucking force in his back pocket. The day I realized this was the day I saw Royce's bad side. I never wanted to see it again, because I was afraid. Afraid that something like this would happen again.

"He's going to be okay, Dutch. This is Royce. He doesn't go down like that..."

My eyes squeeze closed as I replay everything tonight. From the party, to my sleeping, to Orson coming to wake me. *Goddamnit!* Why did I not think that was weird? Usually it would have been Royce coming to get me. Why didn't I see the urgency with Orson, or the worry lines with Storm?

I fly off my chair again. "Why the fuck did no one tell me he was hurt on the boat?" The officers stop talking with Dad as Mom looks around nervously at the passing nurses. Always afraid of what people are thinking.

I point to a guilty-looking Orson and Storm. "You both could have told me!"

"What good would that have done, Duchess?" Orson stands, pushing his hands into his pocket. "He didn't want you to know because he knew it would set you off. There was nothing we could do until we were back on land. He just—" Orson pauses, his eyes boring through me. "He just wanted you."

I cross my arms in front of myself defensively. Pain anchors my heart and refuses to let go. "He will always have me. Forever. Reg—" My voice breaks and my knees buckle. "Oh my god, what if I lose him?" The mere thought of ever losing Royce was enough to make me hurt physically. I couldn't and wouldn't survive the absence that he would leave.

Royce and Storm both drop to the ground on either side of me, their arms around my neck. "Hey," Orson whispers into my ear. "He is going to be alright. You know there's no way that stubborn fucker will let you walk this earth without being able to protect you."

My lips quiver and my heart throbs from the new scar that's inflicted on it, initials RK.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kane?" A doctor dressed in scrubs enters and I once again fly to my feet.

"Yes?" my mom says, but I push everyone out of my way and make it to the front.

Mom nods. "His sister. Please, go on."

Dad is beside me, an arm around my shoulder with Mom on the other side. My other two brothers behind us.

This is it.

My pulse quickens, blood crashing through my ears. This could be the end of life as I know it.

"He's going to be okay. He's actually awake now and is asking for... Duchess?" the doctor says, confused. The relief that floods through me is heavy enough to cement my feet to the ground. I clasp my hands together and give myself a few minutes of breath, before following the doctor down to his room while everyone else waits in the waiting room.

Seeing his name Royce Kyle Kane inscribed into the little clipboardt in front of his room burns a new fire through my veins. I want to get him out of here.

The doctor opens the door and gestures inside. "He may not make a lot of sense because he's still coming to. Try not to take anything he may say to heart. It's probably the cocktail of drugs that he's on."

Curling my lips behind my teeth, my shoulders slump in defeat as I push through the doors to enter. The sharp beeping, the pungent smell of bleach, *the beeping*.

"Roy?" I whisper, and he turns his head, his arm stretched out wide. He doesn't look bad. His face is the same. He looks normal, if not for the wires connecting him to a machine.

"Get in here. Now." He's still bossy.

I can't stop the tears that spill over my cheeks as I rush forward.

"Stop crying, Duchess," he growls, wriggling up the bed.

I swipe my tears away angrily, scowling at him. "I can't believe you didn't tell me that you were hurt!"

He reaches for my hand, but I retreat away from him.

"I'm so angry with you. I thought you died!"

He snatches my hand in his and yanks me down, freakishly strong for someone who just came out of surgery. "And what would you have done, hmm?" Finally, I lie down, kicking off my Vans and saddling up beside him. "You need a shower and give Orson his fucking hoodie back."

"Shut up," I murmur against his body, tears drenching the sheets. "Don't ever do that again."

“Mmmmm.” I can hear the drowsy tone in his voice, he must be drifting off. “Duchess?” I don’t answer, squeezing the white sheets in the palm of my hand. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“I love you too,” I say softly, and before I can form any other words, sleep takes hold of my muscles and my eyes turn heavy.

“Are you kidding me? Look how cute they are!” I hear Sloane’s voice in the background as I come to, swiping the sleep from my eyes. Once everyone is in focus, I take in how many people are actually in Royce’s room.

Mom, Dad, and Sloane, along with Orson, Storm, Annette —gag—Orson’s father and Storm’s mother—who is the district attorney for the Bay Area.

“Why is everyone in here?” I say, faking a smile.

“Girl, please let me take you home for a shower.” Sloane is reaching for me before I can protest, but I don’t move away from Royce. I can’t bear the thought of being away from him. Not right now—not ever. That probably makes me sound crazy, and maybe I’m somewhat—*wholly*—dependent on him, but is it a bad thing? Royce and I have always been a package deal. Before I can say no, I catch Dad observing Royce and I closely with a slight frown and tight lips. His narrowed eyes swing between Royce and I ominously. I’ve never had a relationship with Dad, mainly only my mom, but that was no comparison for what he shared with Royce. They have a solid relationship filled with banter and love. Something close to fear scratches its ugly nails down the spine of my back as he assesses me and the situation that I’m in. Has he always stared at me in this way? Or I’m only just noticing now because my senses are on high alert? Or is this new, since what happened last night? I still haven’t found out what actually happened and how Chambers came to stabbing Royce.

An idea pops in my head, forged there by my raging anger that someone wanted—no, tried—to kill my fucking brother last night.

I slip off the bed with new determination, grabbing Sloane's hand and forgetting all about the way Dad was staring at me. "You're right. We should go." Everyone stops their chatting, and I know what they're doing, they're all waiting for my mental snapping point.

"Duchess," Orson warns. "You okay?" Only Royce, Orson, and Storm call me Duchess. No one else. One time when I was ten years old, Trevor Maxwell tried to call me Duchess during PE. I punched him in the nose. That was the first and only time I ended up in the principal's office, but not the first time that I broke someone's nose. My brothers always protected me. It's time for me to do the same.

"I'm fine. I need a shower. I'll be back." Sloane and I begin making our way to the door, but just as I reach for it, I turn my head over my shoulder one last time, my eyes resting on Royce. He's fast asleep, his lips parted. He looks so peaceful. Someone tried to hurt him. Bad. And now, as stupid as it might sound, I want vengeance, and I know where to go first.



Jade

The first thing that I realistically should have mentioned was that my lack of popularity and friends isn't because I don't attract them or that no one wants to be friends with me, because history would show that that's not the case. It's that my brother usually scares everyone off, which admittedly, is why I have the balls to do what I'm about to do.

After taking a shower and changing into clean clothes, Sloane and I make our way down to the kitchen. I open up one of the cabinets, keys upon keys staring straight at me. I don't have my permit yet, but I know how to drive.

I should choose one of the low-key cars. The ones that won't stick out. So I won't choose Dad's Porsche, or Mom's Tesla. There's no point taking the Range Rover or Royce's Ford. My fingers flex over the keys to Royce's black 1969 Camaro.

I smirk, swiping them off the hook.

"Um, are you sure that's a good idea?" Sloane's blue eyes swing between me and my metal carrying fingers.

I flick them into the palm of my hand and nod. "Yes, and stop freaking out." We make our way into the garage and I

slide into the driver's seat of Royce's immaculate old-school ride. The leather upholstery is new, the dash polished with sweet-scented oil. It smells of freshly stitched leather, a hint of Royce's cologne, and a breath of cigarette smoke.

My chest contracts with his smell as I close my eyes and dig the keys into the ignition, twisting it over until the deep rumble of the V8 vibrates beneath my butt.

"Listen," Sloane murmurs, reaching for her belt and clicking it in. "I'm all for this"—she gestures up and down my body—"but I can't lie. I'm also very scared, considering you're fucking with Royce Kane, and I get it. You're his little brat who can do no wrong, but I gotta say..." She whistles lowly, but before another word can come out of her mouth, I slam it into first gear and press my foot down, flooring it out of the garage with a roar of smoke and a scream of tires.

"Oh my god!" Sloane yelps, grasping at the door handle. Her laughter is infectious as we fly onto the main road, my hair whipping me across my face with the windows down. "I have to video this."

"Fine." I laugh. "But nothing goes online. I don't want to stress him out even more."

"Promise." Sloane chuckles, fingers flying over her phone with her wild blonde hair whipping her across the face. She doesn't look up when she asks me her next question. "So where are we going?"

"To Matty's house."

Sloane stills, her hand pausing over her phone. "Why?"

I tuck my hair behind my ear and make my way toward Matty McAlister's house. "Because I know that he was there last night, and I also know that he's going to tell me everything that went on."

Sloane nods. "Seems legit."

We continue the short drive to Matty's house, it's almost dark when we finally pull up to his gated community. The security passes us through as I roll Royce's Chevy up to the circular driveway.

I slam the car door closed and make my way up the steps leading to his house. Just as I come to the door, it swings open and Matty stands on the other side, his innocent hair ruffled, and his pearly blue eyes dipped in sadness.

“What happened?” I ask Matty. Matty and I are a long story. We’ve shared stolen kisses since we were young, but it was all innocent. Sloane has been saying that he’s in love with me for years, but I don’t buy it.

Matty runs his pale hands through his hair, flexing his muscles. “Listen, I think you should ask Royce.”

“I’m asking you...” I try for the gentler approach, seeing as he’s quite clearly upset.

Matty takes a seat on the step, his mouth covered by his hands while his eyes come to mine.

“Chambers said something about you, Royce flew off like Royce does, and this time, instead of Chambers retracting his bullshit comments, he tried to fight Roy. Shirts came off, Royce was on fire, ready to pound on some flesh and enjoy it—which he did. He beat Chambers pretty bad, but he went to walk away, and that’s when Chambers said—” Matty pauses, and anger flashes over his eyes, his teeth clenched.

“Said what, Matty?” My patience is running thin. I can feel my frustration wavering and my muscles tighten.

“He said that as soon as Royce is away that he’s going to put his dick so deep inside you that you will never want Royce again.”

I still, my mouth agape. “And?”

Matty’s baby blues slide between Sloane and me. “And what? And that’s what he said, so Royce lost it. His hand went to his throat, he was straight-up choking him out. He lifted Chambers off the ground with one hand, Jade. One fucking hand. Our linebacker. With one hand.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you, one hand. Then what happened?” My foot is tapping furiously, because I’m not one bit convinced that what Chambers said warranted Royce almost losing his life. In fact, I’m even more angry

than I was before I got here. There better be something else.

"There's nothing else. He choked him until Chambers went purple, and then Chambers pulled out a knife and stabbed him in the stomach. We all scattered after that."

I sink backward, dropping down onto the steps with my face buried in my hands.

"Why is he like this?"

"Why?" Matty gasps with wide eyes, seemingly stunned by my question. As if I should know why, or that the answer is obvious. "Aside from the fact that he's your brother, are you blind?"

I shake my head, swiping the tears off my cheeks. "What do you mean 'am I blind'? He could have died. All for what?" I turn, facing Matty. My lips tremble as I swipe my runny nose. "To protect my virtue?"

Sloane pats my hair. "I know you don't want to hear this right now, but those boys—especially Royce, put you on a pedestal so high that no one and nothing can touch you." A sharp ringing sound stings my eardrums as the realization of her words touch me. I should start pulling away from Royce, to save him from making this same mistake again. He's not smart when it comes to me. He's irrational, impetuous, and borderline psychotic, but even as I think those words, I know that I can't give him what he needs. That may be selfish of me, but I just can't. Not right now.

Matty's arm hooks around my neck, pulling me in closer. "I heard that Chambers is in the slammer, his old man is refusing to bail him out."

"He was always a good man," I sob. Chamber's father is the coach of our football team. He's the good kind. Not sure what happened to Chambers.

I stand from the steps and make my way back to Royce's car. "Thanks, Matty," I call out, opening the door. I had plans to go see Chambers, but with him in a jail cell, I think I'll sleep easy tonight.

"Anytime. Hey, Jade?" he calls out, leaning against the porch railing. "I know this is shit timing, but it's my birthday in two Saturdays, not sure if you remember—"

I offer him a small smile. "I do."

His eyes widen in shock momentarily. I instantly want to smack myself for giving him any kind of hope. I have to be careful when it comes to boys. If I move forward with someone, it has to be worth being on the receiving end of Royce's wrath. Matty just isn't.

"Anyway, I'm having a party, we're all hitting the slopes. Think you'll be keen? Of course, with your entourage."

I squeeze the door handle. *Not a chance.* "Sure, I'll think about it and see how Royce is feeling."

"Of course." He winks. "See ya, Sloane." He waves us both off and we slip back inside the car.

"God, he's so nice. Why can't all guys be like Matty?" Sloane relaxes into her seat.

"Probably because we wouldn't be interested."

We both burst out laughing as I drive us back to my house.

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Jade

"Royce..." I whine. "You can't be out here. You have to be in the house." My palm works furiously over my body, rubbing slick oil over my skin.

"She's right, you stubborn fuck." Storm pushes down his glasses over his nose, pausing his typing for a few seconds to glare at Royce.

"It's been eleven days. Fuck off." He and I still haven't spoken much about what happened at the party. Not about what happened just before, when he wanted me to go back on the boat with him, and not about what happened after. It has been tough, because I for one have noticed the shift in Royce. He's become a little more on edge. Not just with me, but with everyone.

"You know Matty's party is something you should take him up on, Jade!" Sloane says innocently, tilting her head up to the sun while baking her already tanned skin.

"What?" Storm snaps before Royce can even get a word in.

Sloane must have just realized what she had said because her fingers flex and her lips curl between her teeth. "Oh, um..." Or she did it on purpose.

I roll my eyes, just as my phone dings beside my water bottle. I pick it up, opening the message from India.

India: Hey girl, I hope your brother is holding up okay.

I send off a text saying he's back to his asshole-ish self and set it back to the ground.

When my eyes meet Royce's, he's glaring at me with cold, distant ones and raised brows.

"What'd I do now?" I say, already knowing I'm in trouble. "That was India."

Royce flips me off. "Not what I'm talking about and you fucking know it."

I glare at him. "I have no intention of going."

"Going where?" Orson asks, bouncing a basketball between his lanky legs. "I just saw Matty B and told him we'd load up and head to his birthday." Everyone laughs except Royce. Just as he's about to interrupt our laughing, Dad comes out the sliding doors, whistling.

"Roy, a word?" At his presence, I fold my arms in front of myself. I'm instantly uncomfortable and I don't know why. Royce stands from his chair, making his way into the house. I watch his retreating back with a pang of sadness in my chest. My frown is sharp.

"Hey." Orson takes a seat at the end of my lounger. "What's with the frown?"

I grab the leather basketball off him and practice spinning it on the tip of my index finger. "It's Royce." I glance toward the door to make sure he's not coming, before focusing back on Orson's hazel gaze. "He's a bit off since the incident and I don't know if it's a me thing or a him thing."

Storm's eyes go to Orson, and I watch the silent exchange unfold in front of me.

"Girl, stop. The man just got shanked, he's moody by nature at times. Let him heal." Sloane wriggles back into her seat and covers her closed eyes with her Versace glasses.

"And anyway, it doesn't help that you're growing into this total fucking ten and he has to fight all of the assholes off at school."

"He doesn't even go to our school anymore," I interfere, referring to all three of them graduating a few months ago. I only have a couple more months left with Orson and Storm before they begin their life without little old me. "Will you guys miss me when you leave?" Storm is attending Brown and Orson is flying to LA to play for their team.

"Please." Orson brushes me away.

Storm continues to glare at me. "I literally could not forget you if I tried, Duchess. I mean that from the bottom of my heart." He says the words with a passive look over his face, stoic and emotionless.

"Well, that's not very assuring, considering you don't have one."

Storm taps his temple. "Ah, she's catching on."

"Only took me almost ten years," I grumble, relaxing into my chair.

"For real, I think Royce is just healing. Sloane is right—for once—" Orson stands, removing his shirt and tossing it over his chair. His brown skin glistens against the sun, while his high cheekbones sit above his soft lips that curve around his straight, white teeth. Orson is beautiful. Insanely attractive. The kind of male that almost everyone stops to stare at.

He runs the palm of his hand over his tight abs. "I'll have a chat with him."

Storm raises one thick eyebrow. "Really?" I watch the exchange between the two of them, and for the first time ever, I feel like I'm missing something, or that someone isn't telling me something.

"Why the secrets?" I ask just as Orson dives into the pool and Storm packs away his laptop.

"We don't keep secrets, remember?" Storm announces clearly, while carefully placing his entire life into its satchel.

I wait for Royce.

But he never returns.

Later that night I'm in my room, listening to music on my speaker. I still haven't seen Royce since he disappeared earlier today when we were near the pool. One minute he was with us and the next Dad is taking him away. Something has shifted in the house, and I'm still not sure how or why. After hanging with me for a few more minutes, the boys also drifted into the house. I figured they were going to have that chat with Royce. I don't want to text them or go knock on Royce's door. I don't want to be annoying, even though they annoy me.

Flipping over to my side, I tuck my hands under my face. Tomorrow better be better. Today sucked.

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Royce

She can't know. Leaving her is going to cripple me, but I have no choice. Not now. Not ever. And not when it comes to her.

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Jade

I wake the next morning with stiff limbs, stretching my arms above my head. I'm hoping Royce has calmed down from whatever he was upset about. I want to tell him that we don't have to go to Matty's birthday—it was just an invite. I always feel the need to talk him down, but that's only because he has somewhat become my responsibility, as much as I have become his. We both take care of each other, we always have.

Jogging down the stairs and making my way into the sitting room, I catch both Mom and Dad standing in front of the fireplace, in a hushed conversation. Their chatter instantly cuts out as soon as I enter.

"Morning," I say nervously, glancing between the two of them. Once again, that same niggling feeling is there. Something doesn't feel right.

Mom turns to face me. "Honey, I don't want you to—" Her voice catches in her throat, a teardrop slipping down her cheek. She breathes in, and then out. "The police will be here in a second and I would like you to not stress out."

"That's kind of hard to do when you're standing there quite clearly stressing out, Mom..." My heart rate quickens,

my palms slick with sweat as I cross my arms in front of myself. Mom is always composed, trapped in a society where she thinks perfection is the only way to exist. This isn't perfection, this is fragility. You're handing humanity a weapon to use against you if all you expect is perfection.

Her bottom lip catches between her teeth as she tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. I watch as she fidgets with her rings, her bracelet, before going back to her hair. "It's Royce. We woke this morning and he's gone. His room is tipped upside down—" Her voice once again catches in her throat and she moves to the other side of the room to gather a handful of tissues. Pressing them to her nose, she blows loudly. There's a knock on the door.

Dad moves between my mom and me, his eyes remaining on mine. That same chill slides down my spine. When he prances past me, he moves in slow motion. His chest is out in confidence, a slight close-lipped smile. I get that he's trying to reassure me, but nothing is going to help.

Mom takes my hand in hers, but everything is moving slow. Caught in the confusion of it all, I tug on the palm of her hand. "Tell me what's going on?"

"It's Royce," she murmurs, swiping the stray tears with her tissues. "He's gone, sweetheart."



Jade

Four Years Later

“Like family to me.” Has to be the most overused term in history. Family. Six letters, one meaning, but double-sided. Family could be the reason why you trust someone, or it can be the reason why you’d never trust anyone again. I already know what side I sit on.

If you struggle to sleep at night, someone is thinking of you. Like an anchor, tugging on your soul to keep it in this world, as opposed to losing yourself in purgatory. Isn’t that what a dream state is? Purgatory for your head and the messed-up shit that happens inside of it? The place your demons meet with your sanity, and they fight about who will win. Will it be your nightmares or the actuality of peace? I like to think of my life as purgatory, where every day I struggle with both sides. The good, the bad, and the demons I can’t get rid of. Unfortunately, I would say that I’ve been healing in purgatory for the past four years, but I haven’t. My soul is trapped in Hell, unwilling to move on. I’ve blocked people out, shut down, and turned to things I

shouldn't to pacify the raw hunger I feel for the one person I should never have lost

Sloane drops down on the chair opposite me at our favorite coffee shop in the heart of San Francisco, right near The Market. I can't wait to finally be out of San Francisco. To escape this endless cycle of my personal nightmare.

"Are we going out this weekend?" Sloane asks, hiding her face behind a curtain of newly dyed red hair. "You know, one last hurrah in The Bay area before we have plenty more hurrahs at college *together* this time."

Her logic doesn't make sense since we already spend a lot of time partying anytime she is home. For the past four years, I've been making up for lost time. Getting stuck in whatever I can by doing whatever I want. Sloane remained the most popular girl in Stone View, even when she's away at UCLA. I did okay too, but we all know it's because of—him.

"Yes," I answer quickly. "I need a distraction this weekend." It's Friday night, but that's not the reason why I need a distraction. It's the date that this Friday is.

Her hand comes to mine, the corners of her blue eyes crinkling around the edges. Sloane isn't the same girl she used to be. She's older, rounder, sexier. She's not some naïve little puppy that wants to hang around all of the hot people at school. Now she scares them off by baring her teeth. "I'm sorry. How long has it been now?" The waiter comes to our table.

"Four years," I murmur before distracting myself with coffee. "Can I get a caramel latte, please."

Sloane orders hers before looking back at me. "Shall we change the subject?"

I nod. "Yes. About this weekend..." I never like talking about him. In fact, I've gone four long fucking years without so much as whispering his name.

I'm angry. Hurt. But mostly, angry.

Sloane starts yapping off about what she wants us to do and how we should go about it. I'm not surprised to hear that Matty is home and throwing a party at his parents beach house. Not much has changed where Matty is concerned. Still with the same girl, attending UCLA with Sloane, and still the biggest party-thrower in Stone View. We continue through our plans as I sip on two lattes, a bowl of chili fries, and a chocolate cake. When it's time for both of us to head home, I kiss her goodbye and make my way out to my car.

Distraction is the key that cracks open a broken soul. I turn up the music in my BMW all the way home. *Home*. The large white pillars hold the old-school plantation style mansion up delicately, so uncommon to the standard architecture of San Fran. The manicured grass springs to life and the scatter of vibrant flowers give the otherwise plain style multi-million-dollar property a version of life. Everything is exactly the same, without it being exactly the same. I look at this house with new eyes since he left.

Sighing, I reach for my handbag and crawl out of my car. I can't wait to not be here.

"Jade? Is that you?" Mom asks as I slam the front door closed. I was hoping to slip in discretely, but I'm shit out of luck. Like usual.

I drop my bags near the front door, removing my scarf. Mom has changed a little over the past four years, becoming more maternal. I think she regrets a lot of what happened with him, and now she's trying to make up for it with me. It's exhausting.

When I amble into the kitchen, I catch her with a wooden spoon clutched in her delicate hand, stirring through cake batter in a couple of large bowls. Her blonde hair is cut razor-sharp now, hanging casually around her jawline. "Will you be home for dinner tonight?"

"Um." My eyes fall to my toes. Bright blue nails. I like blue, it reminds me of the ocean. Of tranquility and the sound of angry waves crashing against the acquiescent damp sand. I've always loved the defiance of the ocean. It's moody, beautiful, and could kill you if you're not smart enough to handle its currents. "I guess."

I know that I'm lucky to have had been welcomed into a family that actually fed me. Bathed me. And paid for anything and everything that I could want. They had money. They offered me a warm home and food in my hungry belly. I counted myself lucky. I was well aware of how some foster children had it. But should we really compare our lives to the unfortunate occurrences of others. I think not.

"Great!" Mom interrupts my coiled thoughts. Her eyes are bright, her cheeks flushed. Something's not right. The sadness that has always clouded her is no longer there. Her movements aren't sluggish, there's a bounce in her step. It's almost as though— "Royce is home."

I freeze, my hands stilling over my water bottle. It feels as if all of my blood leaves my body as my mouth hangs open. *She didn't just say what you thought she did, Jade. Your brain is in purgatory again.* My heart races so fast I can't suck in any oxygen. I'm going to stop breathing.

"What?" My tone is loud, the syllables sharp enough to cut anyone who says that name again. I shake off my instant thoughts and bring my eyes back to hers. "He's coming home?!" I swallow long gulps of water to stop my panic from illustrating over my face. *No. No. No.*

"It's his birthday, Jade. I thought you would remember. He's your brother. Yes, he's coming home. I'm just" —tears fall down her cheeks— "so happy, Jade. I thought he had left us for good."

So did I. My brother who left me. *He fucking left me.* Abandoned me just like everyone else. He was no better.

I squash the memories that begin to rise to the surface of my brain. The melancholy that his name left on my heart is

too much for my brittle soul to handle right now. I've put on a front over the years, a very fucking good one, and I do a lot of things to distract myself from acknowledging my feelings, but nothing, and I mean nothing, comes close to the touch of Royce fucking Kane. Even when he's not here physically, he's still inside of me. Living. Existing. *Betraying.*

"I haven't seen him in so long," is all I manage to say, unable to process what's happening right now. *He fucking left me.*

Mom nods her head eagerly, busying herself back to stirring. Vanilla, no doubt. Royce's favorite. "I know. It's been four years, so we want to welcome him home with open arms. God, Jade." She turns to face me, tears filling her eyes. "I'm so happy that he's coming home."

I want to be happy too, if he wasn't such a piece of shit for leaving. I was a baby when I was fostered into the Kane family. They took me in as their own, and even Royce pulled me in and treated me like I was his real-life sibling. He was my everything, and being three years older than me, I looked up to him. He took care of me every single day that I was in this house. All of my life I watched as every boy worshipped him, and every girl wanted him. I didn't do either of those things, but my soul needed him. Until he left me. Alone. In this house. *I hate him.*

I drag my sad mood back upstairs, wishing I could fast-forward this day. Or rewind back to when I was born and just not be born.

As soon as I reach my bedroom door, I swing it open and fall onto my bed. The feathers inside my blanket curving around my petite body as my long brown hair sprawls out around my head. This room holds so many memories of him and I. This whole house does. His bedroom itself remains untouched, and sometimes, when it gets bad, I sleep in his bed. His room is like the charger for my soul when someone else would empty it.

I'm going to see Royce tonight.

I don't want to see Royce tonight.

I wanted him for so long, cried for him every night until tears stung the corners of my eyes and my lips cracked from dehydration. Now that I know he's coming home, I don't want him. I'm angry at him. It's like those four years did nothing to ease my anger. Time only bathed it, kept it under control.

I sigh, pulling out my phone and flicking through my playlist. I hit an old-school Guns N' Roses song and slip into my bathroom, needing to scrub the day off my skin.

Black. It's my favorite color. Not because it's slimming—I don't need to look slim. But because it's the color you can wear when you don't need to put in any effort at all. Like right now. I don't want to put in any effort even though Mom will no doubt be wearing Prada. The prodigal son returns. I squeeze on a pair of tight black skinny jeans and a loose black shirt. Its thin straps clinging to my frail collarbones. I always wear makeup. I love everything about makeup and how you can artfully apply it to pull off a different look. But tonight, I settle for CC cream and light mascara, piling my long hair into a high ponytail. I just want this over with.

My phone starts vibrating on my bedside table, I pick it up, answering. "What's up?"

"Okay, I need to ask you a question..." Sloane purrs down the line. She's probably already drunk.

I hesitate. "Sure?"

"Matty and Rachel broke up. Would it be shit of me if I hit that, even though she's not our friend?" She's definitely drunk. "I know you and Matty had that awkward thing too..." Matty and I were nothing, but I also know that Sloane has been pining after him since around when Royce left. "Nothing that you're thinking of, and we were kids, Sloane. To answer your question, do what you want, as long as you're sure they're not together." About to enter her

freshman year of college and she's still asking about Matty.
"If you want him, he's yours."

Sloane sighs. "Okay. I guess. It's just we all know he has always had a crush on you."

I roll my eyes, cradling my phone on my shoulder.

She continues. "Wanna go get loaded fries?"

"Um, I sort of can't." I catch my reflection in the mirror, realization once again washing over me.

"Why?"

I hear the deep growl of a loud engine pull down our driveway—*is that a fucking motorbike?* "Will talk later." The rumble is low, reverberating around my room like a soft pounding symphony. It's heavy enough to squash you.

"Jade!" my mom yells out from the kitchen. "Downstairs."

I quickly shove on my Ugg boots and give myself one more once over before pushing my phone into my back pocket and making my way downstairs. I can see a gathering around the front door as I come down, but I don't look up until the last minute.

"Sorry I'm—" I pause.

There, standing in front of me, is Royce Kane. My stomach hits the floor and my cheeks flare to life. I can feel my blood drain all the way to the tips of my toes when our eyes connect. My heart slows in my chest. The hate is still there, the anger and pain, but now there's something else happening. Something I'm not ready to acknowledge yet. His ice-blue eyes. Colder than the Atlantic Ocean, but hotter than the pits of Hell. His dark, unruly hair looks like his hands have brushed through it one too many times, and his big, lean body towers over everyone in the room—including the room itself. He has tattoos all over what skin I can see. Royce Kane doesn't just look like a bad boy. Royce Kane looks like a bad man. He's not the spoiled rich boy, playing every girl at school. He's—different. His sharp jaw is clean-shaven, illustrating every cut line of his perfectly constructed face. His straight nose and soft lips. Shit.

Double fucking shit. He's even fucking hotter than he was when he was young.

He's in loose faded designer jeans, military boots, and a casual black shirt. But there's something over his shirt that catches my eye. Well, two things catch my eye actually...

The first thing is the embroidered patch that's sewn into his left pec.

Wolf Pack Motorcycle Club.

And second, I'm pretty sure Royce Kane hates me.

My eyes burn from not blinking. This time his scowl is matched with a dark smirk that spreads over his swollen lips. "Well, didn't you grow up..."



Royce

I'm not gonna lie, seeing her squirm in my presence is fascinating. She was my fucking world the day her sad little soul entered our house. I mean, I wanted a brother, but Jade wasn't half as bad as what I thought having a little sister would be like. She hated Barbie dolls and preferred Transformer trucks. Not much else I could complain about, until she grew tits.

"Duchess." I smirk, throwing out her nickname. I loved the little shit when she was growing up. Now I can't. I won't.

She flinches from the use of her nickname, and I also didn't miss the scan she did over me as soon as she saw me. Then I watched as the blood drained from her face when she read my patches.

"Great!" Mom says, clapping her hands. "Dinner is ready." She hooks her arm in mine as if I've walked back after a weekend away, not four fucking years. "Royce, please tell me you haven't joined a motorcycle gang..."

I unlatch from her grasp and follow behind as Dad hushes Mom's rant and Jade falls into step slightly behind me.

When our parents are out of earshot, I turn my head slightly over my shoulder with a smug grin. "What's the

matter, Duchess, didn't miss me?"

Her eyes meet mine, defiance flashing over them briefly before it's gone. "Never."

I chuckle, turning to face her fully. Just before we're about to turn into the kitchen, I slam my hands against the wall, backing her up against it and caging her in. The tip of my nose glides over her cheek as I inhale her sweet, innocent flesh. She's like a breath of fresh air after being face down in club girl pussy. Only her air is fucking laced with poison. "You should be scared, Duchess. You're not safe from me anymore." My eyes drop down her little body, taking in the soft curves that stretch out over her otherwise delicate stature.

"You two!" Dad calls from the dining room. "What's taking so long?"

Tense bastard.

I push off the wall, knowing full well no one can see us. Fucking hate my rich-ass parents and their rich-ass house.

"You might be right, Royce." She squares her shoulders and looks me deep in the eye. "But I'm not the same girl you left behind either."

"Oh yeah?" I smirk, running my tongue over my bottom lip. "How so?"

"I have teeth now." She shoves past me.

Before I can grab her little ass and back it up against the wall, my phone vibrates in my back pocket. I don't bother to tell the old man that I'll be in in a second, because he knows I'll be in in a second.

"What?"

"Ah," Fluff mutters. "Did I catch you at a bad time?" There's shuffling in the background. "Sorry, Sicko, it's just Lion told me that I can call you about—" Fluff, our new prospect, stammers on the other end of the phone.

I attempt to count to fucking ten, because my old therapist once said it'll help. The same therapist I used to bend over her desk every month until she was dripping over

my cock and calling me daddy, so... maybe she was wrong. Letting me anywhere near your pussy is not something a smart woman would allow. I'd break your heart right after I break your ovaries.

"What is it?" I snap. "You know I'm away, so this better be a fucking emergency."

"Oh, it is. Sorry."

"Stop saying fucking sorry."

"Oh, right, ah, so, Roo has been shot and we're wondering what we should do."

My jaw tenses. "Is it a fatal wound?"

There's more shuffling and then Lion's old ass voice comes through. Lion is our club president. How he got that name is a long fucking story. Mine is Sicko, and that's also... a long fucking story.

"Can always count on my VP to put the fear of God into the prospects." Lion chuckles down the phone.

"Maybe we need to reevaluate who we are letting drag their feet through our clubhouse then."

"I think Fluff is a good one. You've just got to be nice."

"I'm never nice. You know this."

He chuckles again, and I can just imagine the cigar hanging from between his frail lips.

"Is it fatal?" I ask again, sighing.

"It's not. Just wanted to scare Fluff. You make him nervous. I think he actually shits himself every time he has to talk to you. How are the parents?"

"Same, same. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, alright," Lion grunts. "Anything I need to know?" The question doesn't throw me off. Lion always asks it. The fucking hypersensitive prick.

"If you did, you'd know." I hang up my phone and make my way back into the kitchen, pulling out the chair opposite Jade and sinking into the plush leather. My eyes never leave hers.

She picks up her glass of water and empties it in one go, all while trying her hardest to not have to look at me.

"Son, how have you been?" my father asks beside me, cutting into his steak. We lose ourselves in conversation about normal ass shit that I used to be into. I feel bad, I fucking do. I felt bad the day I walked away from all of them with the intention of never returning. That boy with an attitude problem turned into a man with issues. Real fucking issues. But until recently, I've found myself having to drag my ass back to this house for the very reason I fucking left.

Her.

"Royce," my mom mutters, patting her mouth with her linen napkin and placing it daintily onto the table. "Please tell me you haven't joined a motorcycle club."

Dad silences beside me.

My eyes find Jade, who isn't watching me smugly, she's more bored. Blank and expressionless. She's a mere fucking shadow to the girl I once knew. She doesn't want to be here anymore than I do. When we were kids, she had a glow about her, even when we would fight. There was fire that lit up her aura. Now that fire seems to have burned.

"I have. Been there for four years now, Ma."

"Where is there, and why, Royce?"

I toss my napkin onto my plate. Guess we're doing this now. "LA. Not too far from you." My eyes cut to Jade's. "But far enough."

"Aren't you going to say something, Jade?" My mother vocally gasps at Jade. "You two were always so close..."

Jade chokes on her water. It was no secret how close Jade and I were. Everyone called Jade my pet. She was always hanging off my arm, wanting to do everything with me, Orson, and Storm, and she was the only one who was allowed. Pissed a lot of bitches off, the fact that they couldn't ride with us, but my little foster sister could, but they dealt with it. Jade would make my birthday cake every

year too, her and Mom in the kitchen getting messy while Dad was always away doing business shit.

"I have nothing to say," Jade mutters. "Actually, can I be excused?" Mom flicks her wrist, agreeing and Jade shuffles out of the dining room, my eyes never straying from her. When she jogs up the stairs, I watch as her ass bounces with each step.

I bite my lip and grin. If she wasn't my foster sister, I'd have that parked on my shit for at least two business days.

"Kyle?" My mom points at my old man.

He looks at me, and I look at him and all of that awkward bullshit that happens anytime someone is in trouble.

"Mom? I'm twenty-fucking-two years old. I don't need you stressing. I survived on my own, with my brothers, for four years."

"That's beyond the point, Royce! I have been so stressed. You have—" Her tears start coming, and it's the first time I look at her. Really fucking look at her. She has aged drastically since I left. Wearing her hair short, wrapped around her jaw. Wrinkles line the curves around her eyes, but we all know she gets injections on her forehead.

"Sorry, Ma... wasn't the plan."

"So what happened?" Mom asks, finally bringing her eyes to me.

"I can't talk about that with you."

She sighs, standing and clearing the table. "Well, I hope you at least visit more often."

I stand with her, gazing to my old man who is watching me carefully. "Been a very empty house without you, boy..." Dad, on the other hand, looks good for his age. But then, he always fucking did. If only the good looks and charm can hide what lingers beneath the savage businessman that is Kyle Kane.

I punch his arm, a little on the rough side. "How much are you benching?"

He shakes his head and laughs. "More than you." I go into the kitchen and help Mom with the dishes.

"Where's Louise?" I ask, wondering where the maid is. She always walked her old ass around our house doing all the shit my mom was supposed to be doing instead of shopping with her friends.

Mom sighs, putting dish after dish into the washer. "I let her go not long after you left. I didn't want to make the same mistakes I did with you with Jade too."

Her eyes go out to the front of the house where the excessive garage curves around. "She screamed for you every night for the first year, waking up in a sweat. Then it just stopped. Like she gave up."

My lips pinch together. Wish I could say I gave a fuck, but I didn't. I felt for the young Duchess, not the one that's sitting her pert little ass upstairs now.

"Yeah, well, shit changed..."

Mom brings her hands up to my cheeks. "Don't be a stranger. That's an order. And when you're ready, I'm here if you want to talk about whatever happened."

"Sure thing, Ma."

Not going to fucking happen.

After helping Mom clean up, I say goodbye to them both and then head out to my bike. Swinging my leg over my Dyna Glide, I kick start her to life and listen as she rumbles underneath me. Putting a cigarette into my mouth, Jade's bedroom light catches the corner of my eye. The only light that's on on that level. I blow out a cloud of smoke.

One day soon, your ass will be sitting in my clubhouse, and it won't be by choice.



Jade

“Are you happy that we’re finally attending the same college?” Sloane mutters, pushing her sunglasses over her eyes as she floats on top of the water, courtesy of our inflatable unicorn. We had plans to go out tonight, but I squashed them after Royce’s appearance a few days ago. He has thrown me off balance.

“I am.” I kick my legs in the water to get farther away from the edge.

She removes her glasses, her eyes gazing up to the big house behind me. “This place gives me the creeps.”

I shrug. “You’re not alone. Shall we go get food?”

“I seriously just can’t wait to get the fuck out of San Francisco and back to LA.”

I laugh, splashing her with water. “It’s not that bad...”

But she’s right. I can’t wait either. We both climb out of the pool and grab our towels, and I wrap one around my body before squeezing the excess water from my thick, long mane. I let it grow out a lot longer since Royce left. I don’t know why, but his name is stuck inside of my brain and isn’t leaving. Not that it left at all in the past four years, but it simmered. Somewhat.

"Okay, so. I know you don't want to talk about the trio, but did you watch Orson's game last night?"

My mind drifts into outer space at the mention of one of my brothers.

I nod, popping off the lid to my water bottle and taking a sip. "Never miss a game."

"Man, he is amazing. And sexy as fucking ever—an—"

"—almost married." I glare at her with narrowed eyes. Orson is about to marry India from school. Twist of fate, she ended up being the daughter of the cook his father hired, which was why she had appeared at the party that night. Apparently, they got into the same school too. Cute. For some people, it just works out.

Sloane groans, stomping her foot as we make our way back into the house. "Is he really though? I mean, just because they're having a child together, I don't see why they have to get married."

I shake my head, scolding Sloane. "He's literally in love with her. He tells me all the fucking time, and she is a good woman. Stop it. Drop Orson." One, because I don't feel like talking about him in the sense that it's bringing back thoughts of seeing Royce just the other night, and two, I've only just started talking with Orson and Storm again after they left to go on with their lives. They didn't want to leave me so soon after Royce, but it's not like they had a choice. They had to move on with their life and do what they needed to do. I'm not sure either of them could really help me anyway. I loved my brothers, but I was certain that having them around would only intensify the pain that Royce inflicted with his absence. Like constant reminders of what I had and lost.

"Fine." Sloane snickers, kicking my door closed behind herself while making her way to the duffel bag that's at the end of my bed. "But text Matty to see what he's doing, since I'm bored. We need to have a final SF drink because I'm never coming back here."

After Royce left, I was a shell of the girl I once was, and I don't think I'll ever find a home there again. My friends did their best, but the best didn't help when all I wanted was him.

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Jade

“Come on, Jade!” my mom yells from downstairs. “We’re going to be late if we don’t get on the road right now. It’s a long drive.” I love my Mom. I agreed to stay behind and do my first year at Stanford after she had her first panic attack. It took a while for me to convince her that she wasn’t losing “both” her kids and that attending UCLA was always my end game. I wanted to be with Sloane and to branch out *away* from The Bay area. She came to the idea eventually, but was adamant that she was driving me.

“Coming!” I holler, throwing my backpack over my shoulder. I take one last look around my bedroom. The dark purple walls aged into a burned lilac; the bed unmade. I won’t miss it at all. Memories flash through my head.

The bed.

The walls.

The scent.

Once I reach downstairs, I open my car door and glare at her. “You do know I’m totally capable of driving myself? It’s why you bought me this pretty BMW M8 Grand Coupe. You know. So I can drive this ridiculously expensive car and be safe.”

She waves me off, putting her seatbelt on in the passenger seat. "Nonsense. I get to fly home. It works perfectly."

There was a pileup on the highway which extended our travel time further. The drive was long. So freaking long that we ended up stopping for a night to break the trip in half. But it's Sunday and I am here. Finally.

I slam the door closed and smile at Mom.

"I'm so proud of you, sweetheart," she whispers, her eyes never falling from mine. I love my mom. She's everything a girl would ever ask for in one, but she isn't perfect. No parent is, only mine failed me a little more than most.

"Thanks, Mom. I wa—"

I hear a loud rumble of bikes behind me, but I don't turn. There's no point. It won't be him and bikers obviously go to college too.

The bikes pull up right beside my car and my mom's face pales before a smile stretches wide. I already know what she's going to say before his name leaves her lips.

"Royce?"

My mouth snaps closed, still refusing to turn and face the music.

"I wasn't expecting you—all of you..."

"Hey, Ma, thought I'd come see my little sister off on her first day at a brand-new college. You know, catching up on those years..." His voice was like silk inside of a bad dream. You knew you shouldn't listen to the way it sashays in the wind, but you can't help but be hypnotized by it.

I finally turn to face him, but I'm momentarily thrown by how many bikers there are behind him, as well as an older man on the bike to the side. They're all wearing the same leather vests.

"Thanks, Royce, but it really wasn't necessary..." I try to contain the bite in my tone, but I wasn't kidding about the

teeth thing... I don't fucking need him anymore, and it's too fucking late. Anger rushes through me, down to the tips of my fingers.

Royce places a cigarette between his smirking lips, his head tilting to the side as he watches people pile into the school. "Nah, Duchess, it really was..."

I sigh, because I truthfully can't be fucked arguing with him right now. "Well, thanks..." My eyes flick to all the guys. "You can leave now."

He removes his helmet, dropping his cigarette to the ground and putting it out. "I'm walking you up."

"Royce," Mom says. "A word?"

"Not right now, Ma. I told you that I'll come see you next weekend. I'm just here to make sure Jade gets settled in."

I lick my lips, rolling my eyes. "Fine." I throw my backpack into his chest. "You can carry this." There're a few grunts and chuckles from his friends, but I ignore them all and make my way to the front doors. There's another reason why he's here. He doesn't give a damn how settled I get. He's not Royce Kane anymore. He's the big bad biker with big bad friends and with a hole the size of Mars in his chest where his heart used to be.

After we grab my dorm details from the snobby girl in the main foyer, we make our way up the stairs and find my room. Royce's friends obviously all wanted to stay downstairs. Bar one. His name is Gypsy and he has to be around the same age as me, or in between me and Royce. After his obvious perving at every girl, it was made clear exactly why he was here. To perv.

"Sicko, your sister is hot. She has this whole, exotic thing going on about her."

I turn to face them both, my eyes cutting to Gypsy. Just when I'm about to cuss him out and tell him to go fuck himself, I look at him for the first time today. Young, light brown floppy hair, and a cheeky smile. He's the boy next

door in a leather motorcycle vest. I can imagine he would get more attention than he would give.

"You're not my type." I turn back to my door, pushing my key in. "And who's Sicko?"

"We made sure that you have your own room..." Mom says, interrupting my question while pointing to the double bed.

"How?" I ask, surprised.

Mom shrugs. "We made sure."

My heart sinks. "Oh." Of course. Money equals power, and the Kane's have all of it.

"Hey." Royce's hand comes to my chin, tilting my face up to his. "I'll come check on you every weekend."

"Royce?" I murmur, even though his grip is so tight it's making my lips push out.

"What?" he asks, his eyes searching mine. This needs to stop. I hate him. *He left me.*

"Really not necessary. I have Sloane here too, and Matty. I don't need you petting me here like you did at home."

He laughs, stepping away. "You don't know how I keep my pets now."

I raise my brows in challenge, my arms crossing in front of my chest. "And how is that?"

He pins me with a simple stare. "I don't." Then his eyes go to Mom, his fake smile evident. "I'll look after her."

Mom nods, pulling me in for one last hug. "Okay. I better head to the airport. I planned to spend the day with you but all that traffic delayed us."

"It's okay, Mom. I love you," I whisper, squeezing her tightly.

"Love you too."

Before I started Stanford and when I told my parents that I'd be studying to get my medical degree, I half expected them to doubt me. A lot. But they didn't. It was between this or political science. Politics was my plan B if I didn't get into med. I knew I could also be great as a political consultant,

but it wasn't where my heart and passion burned. I'm thankful I got into med school, even if I know it's going to be a long, tedious road, it's still one I want to take.

Mom leaves and I'm in the room alone with Royce and Gypsy.

"Roy, I'm serious. You don't need to be here."

He flops down onto my bed, leaning back onto his elbows. He's god awfully more beautiful than I remember. His features are pretty, but then someone came along and cut all the hard edges into them. The tattoos only accentuate his personality. It is as though he was always meant to have the tattoos. His blue eyes roam my face, as his feather-like eyelashes fan out over his tight cheekbones. It's not fucking fair. Why does he have to look the way he does? And Jesus fuck, he clearly has been working out since he left. He was always tall and lean, but the way the veins in his neck and arms swell to the surface of his skin tells me he takes training more seriously these days.

"Ah, but I do."

"Why?" I ask, opening box one of six. I need to busy myself with something other than gawking at him. "Why do you care?"

He seems to think over my words, his eyes scanning me up and down. "Because you're in my city now, so it's only fair. But here's the deal..."

I laugh. "I'm not making a deal with you, Royce."

"Oh, you will..." He smirks. "So, here's the deal. You're in my city now, and I have enemies. Bad ones. I don't need them getting to you to get to me."

I roll my eyes, dropping the box onto the floor and sorting through the photos that I poured onto my bed. "Why do you care?"

Instant. "I don't. But I don't have time to be saving you if you're taken, and then I have to explain to mommy and daddy that their precious little good girl has been captured by bad men."

I scoff, my tongue running over my lip as I bring my eyes right to his. “Sorry, did you just say *precious little good girl?*” I know I should stop talking, but I’m too fired up. “I haven’t been a *precious little good girl* for about—hmm—” I pause, bringing my finger to my temples while basking in his silence. I think I hear Gypsy drop a “oh shit” in the background, but again, I’m too fired up to let this opportunity pass. “Four fucking years, Royce. And those *bad men* you speak of?” I grind my teeth, my lip curling up in a snarl while my eyes narrow. “Pretty sure I’ve seen worse. But sure thing, big brother.” I turn, bending over and picking another box up off the floor while turning to face him, dropping it onto the bed. “Whatever lets you sleep at night.”

I would be proud of my comeback if the backstory wasn’t so fucking sad.

He stands from my bed until he’s almost directly in front of me. “Check beneath your bed tonight, Duchess.” He leans down until his lips are near my ear. “Because I will be the monster lurking beneath it. Everywhere you go, I’ll be there. Who you talk to, I’ll know.” He leans back, his cold, emotionless eyes disregarding me as though I’m nothing but a cockroach needing to be stepped on. “And you’re wrong...”

“How so?” I say, turning to watch him as he moves across my room, picking up my cell phone and punching something into it.

He glares, tossing my phone at my chest. “You haven’t seen the worst, because that would have to come from *me*, and trust me when I say, I have guarded you from that side all your fucking life.” His hand is on the door handle as he pulls it open with Gypsy slipping beneath his arm and to the other side. “I’ve changed phone numbers. Fucking use it.” Then he slams my door harder than he made his reappearance into my life.

It took me a couple hours to settle into my room before I got batshit bored and called Sloane.

"Hey!" she breathes into the phone. "Are you here? Matty doesn't get back until next week and I'm bored!"

"Yes!" I give her my dorm details and then wait for her to come up.

I still haven't told her about Royce. I don't really want to. One, because she had a massive crush on him when we were kids and two, I don't know what it is that Royce is actually doing back in my life. It's almost too good to be true. I can't trust him the way I used to. He's not the same boy anymore. Now, he feels calculated. Like a snake in the grass, waiting to strike.

There's a knock on the door, pulling me out of my Royce induced thoughts and I swing it open to Sloane and another girl. She has dark hair and slanted eyes; I'm guessing some sort of Asian background. But I could be wrong, so I won't make that assumption out loud.

"Yay!" Sloane pulls me in for a hug. I let her, even though she and I both know how much I hate my personal bubble being violated. "Wow, your dorm is so much nicer than mine!"

"Yeah, I wish I had a bunk buddy though."

"Speaking of," Sloane announces, gesturing to the girl beside her. "This is my new one. Jade, this is Nellie, Nellie, this is Jade."

Nellie nudges her head at me. I take in her appearance. Bright purple hair on the ends of dark roots and a very eccentric style of dress. Striped thigh-high socks, short leather miniskirt, and a strapless top, squashing her tits to the high heavens.

"Hi..."

"So." Sloane slumps onto my bed. "How did the drive with your mom go? Is she finally okay with you being away from her?"

"Ah," I answer. "She is actually much better. The drive was fine, but then Royce showed up and it—"

"—Wait!" Sloane stands abruptly from my bed. "Royce is back?"

"Who's Royce?" Nellie asks from behind me, fiddling with the photo I've already placed on my dresser of the five of us on the boat when we were younger.

"Um," I start quickly, but before I can get a word in, Sloane has her palms pressed to my cheeks, yanking my attention back to her.

"Tell me everything."

I whack her hand away. "Nothing to tell. He came home last weekend for his birthday and told us that he had been with a motorcycle club for the past four years."

"Oh my god..." Sloane drools, her mouth wide open. "Is he hotter than he was when we were younger?"

"What? I'm not answering that. He's my brother."

"—Foster brother, and we all know how he—"

"Sounds like I need to meet him." Nellie smirks, sitting on my bed. I don't mention that I barely know her and that she most definitely should not be sitting on my bed, props to her confidence though. "What club is he with?" Nellie further asks.

"What? Ah, I don't remember." I don't want to tell them any more than I already have. Not that I care if they find him hot, just that I don't want to be talking about him right now.

"Can we change the subject?" I mutter, piling my long hair up into a high ponytail. "Like food. Where can we get food?"

We find a small place off campus. It's the typical greasy spoon diner, with gloss red leather seats, checked floors, and tired waiters. I slip into the booth and scan over the menu.

"So what else has Royce been doing?" Sloane asks. I ignore her. I can't do the song and dance to Royce's tune

today—or ever. When the waitress comes to our table, I smile up to her, thankful for the distraction. “I’ll have the double cheeseburger with extra bacon, please.”

“Fine,” Sloane groans. “But we are going out this weekend. Right, Nellie?”

Nellie nods. “Yep. There’s a spot I go to every weekend. We’ll pick Jade up.”

I dive into my burger, ignoring their talks of what boys are what in the school. To say that I’m not interested is probably an understatement. My sex life is something I protect, so I zone out and dig into my fries.

“Do you know where your classes are on Monday, Jade?” Nellie asks around her straw.

“I think so.” I pop another fry in my mouth. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the door open, but I don’t pay it any attention. “I mean, I have the school map and all of my class numbers, so I’m guessing they won’t be hard to find.”

I look to Sloane, whose eyes are over Nellie’s shoulder and on the new group who just sauntered in. I lean over to see who she is gawking at.

“Sloane...” I nudge her with my shoulder. My friend is blatant when it comes to what she wants. The entire back section of the diner is now occupied with a group of guys. You can practically smell the testosterone from here. Of course Sloane would sniff out the school’s football team like a dog in heat.

“Yes?” She bats her eyelashes at me, and when I look back at the group, I find a couple of them already watching us. Well, probably Sloane more than me. She’s the beautiful red-haired bombshell with great tits, and I’m the weird-looking brunette with creepy eyes. Sloane has always said that I’m completely oblivious when it comes to my appearance and that I’m every guy’s wet dream. I don’t buy it. She’s my best friend, of course she’s going to say that.

Chuckling, I shake my head. “You are terrible.” I lazily scan the group, when one guy catches my eye who is

watching me carefully. His scruffy blond hair reminds me of ancient ash and his dark eyes are like magnetic orbs, pulling me in. He has tanned skin, broad shoulders, and the face structure of a GQ model.

He's attractive. Actually, that's an iniquitous understatement. He's hot as fucking sin, and I'd gladly kneel at church on Sunday for devouring that. Instantly, I ignore my thoughts and the direction to which they went. I can't afford to have crushes. Not now, not ever.

“—Jade!” Now it’s Sloane’s turn to demand my attention.

“Hmm?” I answer, bringing my drink to my lips.

Sloane looks between me and the guy and then smirks. Zoning out on a hot guy isn’t such a bad thing, but when you have a best friend who likes to call you out on everything, it is.

“Ah, I see. Well, don’t stop your eye fuck on my account...”

Nellie looks over her shoulder, finally figuring out what we’re staring at. I notice she visibly stills, her face falling before she turns back to face me. “I wouldn’t even try. My sister knows them, and they’re not what they appear to be.”

“Wasn’t going to.”

Finishing up with our food, we all stand and make our way to the door. The whole time, (all of a few steps), I can feel eyes on us. It’s Sloane. She does this, and it drives me fucking insane. I hate going anywhere with her. Like a magnet, I turn toward them in passing, but my eyes find Ash Blond again and my heart speeds up in my chest. No smile, no frown, he’s simply observing me. I don’t know if it’s intimidating or turning me on, I settle for the first because again, I can’t afford to be turned on. The cold air slaps me across the face when we’re outside, treading down the stairs and making our way to Nellie’s beat-up Honda. It’s a small little hatchback that looks like maybe fourteen years ago, it would have been worth something. I said we could take my car, but Nellie insisted on hers.

"So, my mom and dad are those gross parents who have been together for like, way too long..." Nellie addresses, for God knows why. "It's actually so disturbing because they still make out at breakfast."

"Le sigh..." Sloane murmurs, pulling open the passenger door and sliding the seat forward for me to slip into the back. "I want that one day."

"Well," Nellie mutters, clipping her belt on and starting the car—after a misfire. "You won't get that from any of the guys in there..." Ah, so that's where she was going.

"You don't like them much, huh?" I meant it as a joke, but as soon as it leaves my mouth, I hear the snark in my tone.

"No," Nellie confirms, taking us onto the highway. "I don't."

"Why?" I ask, unable to stop myself.

"Let's just say it's in your best interest to not go there."

Sunday, I spend the day gathering all of my books that I'll need for Monday, which includes but is not limited to meal prepping. I love a good takeout and munch session with potato chips and chocolate, but my body can only survive on meat, vegetables, and carbs. Yes, I said carbs.

I'm climbing into bed at the end of the day when my phone lights up on the bedside table. I reach for it aimlessly, knowing it will be Sloane. She's probably drunk.

"Hello?"

"Jade..."

Dread fills my body. "Yes?"

"...I need you. Meet me downstairs now."

"I can't. I ha—"

"—Now."

"Okay," I whisper, my voice dropping to a deathly level. After hanging up, I clutch the phone to my chest and lay there for a few seconds. I would never be free of this life. Shackled by his initials. I will never be free to live my life. He's always made it very clear that I never will be free. I'll

always be indebted to him, and I'll always have to make myself available to him.

I fling the blanket off my body and tiptoe around my room like I would at home anytime I needed to sneak away.

I grab my phone and flick off another text to him. ~~Would you like me suited up?~~ Chewing on my lip nervously, I wait on his answer.

No.

I choke on my breathing. Knowing he's right downstairs waiting in his fancy SUV is enough to suck the life out of me. I quickly slip on some tight sweatpants and a tank before throwing on a hoodie and zipping up.

Breathe in and out. *You've done this thousands of times, Jade. Pull it together.*

I push my phone and dorm key into my pocket and make my way downstairs. I didn't want to start my college year like this. I didn't.

It takes me one second to find his car idling near the curb. I walk straight for it and open the passenger door before sliding into the soft, warm leather. "Hello, James."

"Jade," James growls, turning to face me. As soon as his eyes lock on mine, all the fear and uncertainty I felt moments ago dissipates. My shoulders square as power surges through my veins.

I lick my lips. "I wasn't expecting you here tonight."

His hand comes to my cheek, his thumb caressing across my lip where he tugs on it gently. "I can't have my Bunny start her college year without a big bang."

I clear my throat, but vomit almost surfaces, so I force spit down my throat to contain it. I'm used to this. It has happened to me every single day almost immediately after Royce left. I don't know why it started. I don't ask and he doesn't tell, mentally caged in a cell with no exit. But somewhere in those four years, things shifted. It turned into something more without anything additional on my part. /

got used to it. The first time it happened, he snuck into my house, into my room. I remember the time because my clock flashed brightly on my bedside table. 3:05 a.m. I hate 3:05 a.m. now. He didn't speak at first. His hand caressed my thigh from beneath the covers, his cold Rolex watch igniting goose bumps all over my flesh. He fucked me that night. Forced himself inside of me in one thrust. I yelped, but his hand slammed over my mouth to stop any more noise. I was shocked. I didn't know what to do. I was fifteen years old, and up until that night, he meant something to me.

Darkness welcomed me during a time that I needed to feel safe, now I bathe in it to keep me sane. Light doesn't give a fuck about the damned, so with the damned, I stayed. I remember the colored dots that danced around the room as pain rippled between my thighs. He tore my walls apart with a single thrust, so I rebuilt them with the pain and blood that he took from me. He never spoke. I felt his damp cock press in and out of me, like a knife twisting and turning in an open wound. Tears poured out of my eyes, but he didn't stop. Finally, he slowed enough for me to feel him pulse inside of me. He pushed himself up, extracting himself, and bent down between my thighs, kissing the blood from my now exposed and violated area.

"I'm going to teach you so many things, Jade. You'll learn to love it eventually. Crave it. You'll learn to submit to me whenever I come calling. Clean yourself up."

I flinched, but I knew better than to pull away from his touch. The second time he raped me, I tried to pull away from him. He made me pay for it, but not in a way that you'd expect him to. James had an art to which he abused his victims, and I was his everlasting paintbrush. He'd use me to paint his new victims and then hand me to the next to borrow. He'd say I was special, that my strokes were unlike any he had seen before. I wanted to burn the whole art studio down along with everyone else inside of it.

"Spend the night with me and I'll drop you off here early in the morning. I have a hotel—soundproof walls." He grins and then pulls us out of the parking lot. I focus out the window and watch as young people laugh with their friends. They have no idea how lucky they are. Oblivious to the kind of evil that I exist among, which is why I could never have a crush on any boys. Regardless of how hot they are or how they make me feel.

The hotel is nice, but of course it is. Penthouse, rich red colors and glass windows that overlook Hollywood Boulevard.

James hands me a glass filled with amber-colored alcohol, loosening his tie. His blue eyes meet mine, so blue. So familiar. I shoot back the rest of the liquid, ignoring the burn that settles in the back of my throat.

"Thank you," I whisper once my voice is stable.

"On your knees."

I obey, sinking to the floor.

"Remove your clothes." He tosses his tie across the room, removing his belt. He slaps the belt across the palms of his hands a few times and then his eyes come to mine as he places it onto the bed. "Your brother is back."

"He is," I say softly, peering up at James from beneath my lashes. His hand comes to my cheek as his thumb grazes over my lips.

"So beautiful, Bunny..." My stomach churns. He comes down to my level and slowly lifts me off the ground, placing me onto the bed, stepping back to take in my nakedness. His hand dips beneath his slacks as he pulls himself out and pumps, his eyes on my body. "All of it belongs to me, doesn't it?"

I swallow, nodding my head. "Yes."

"Spread your legs."

I do, widening them until he's standing between with one hand running over my nipple. Every time his palm skims over my breasts softly, I bite down on the inside of my

cheeks until my mouth pools with metallic blood. I need the pain to distract from the way his gentle touches violate my soul.

He falls down on me until I'm flat on my back. His cock is at my entrance, his tender kisses falling all over my neck as he slides inside of me. Sexual abuse comes in all colors of the rainbow, it's not just black and white. He continues his assault. The same dance that I've learned and move to effortlessly now. He flips me over, taking me from behind, to the side, me on top, him back on top, the positions change, but one thing always remains. The temperament of his lovemaking remains mellow, sensual. It's the kind of sex you'd have with someone you love wholeheartedly, with your husband or your wife. It was after the fourth time that I realized why he did it like this.

Because he didn't just want my body.

He was fighting for my soul, too.

He would never have it. I've hidden it away in a place where no man would ever venture in to retrieve it. The only problem with that is, now no one would find it.



The next morning, I'm standing under a hot shower as the water trickles over my aching body. He may take it slow, but he makes sure to do it for hours. And hours. And hours on end. I shiver climbing out, and as soon as I'm back in my room, I slam my door closed and squeeze my towel.

Day one of freshman year at a new college.

I make my way to my makeup bag and get started. This routine is natural for me. Conceal, fake a smile. Makeup is

the curtain I hide behind, as if it confuses people who try to peek into the real me.

If only I could confuse myself too.

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Jade

The first week of college went fast. I found that my classes were pretty easy to get to despite the fact that the campus was a lot bigger than I had initially assumed during orientation day. It's Friday now and I'm dreading getting ready to go out to whatever it is Nellie has us planned on going to. I didn't hear from James all week, though, so that in itself is something worth celebrating. We're riding in Nellie's car to the other side of LA when Sloane hands me a flask.

I take big sips before handing it back. My drinking got worse when Royce left. I found the more I drank, the deeper I fell down a hole that swallowed all of me—my pain included. I'm one big gaping wound, and alcohol just so happens to be the Band-Aid. It could have been worse. I could have turned to snow.

I rub my hands up and down my thighs. I kept it casual. Black skinny jeans with tears up the thighs and a white lace bodysuit that does more for my tits than any bra could have.

"God, I can't with your perfect fucking tits!" Sloane grumbles.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Yours are huge!"

"So!" Her hands come to my breasts and she squeezes. "Fake ones always look better." I whack her hands away and roll my eyes. If only she knew *why* and *how* I came about getting fake tits.

"So, are you going to tell us where we're going?" I say, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the center console. Using the rearview mirror to rearrange my hair, I fluff it up at the front and run my pinky finger over my bright red lips.

"It's a surprise." Nellie's eyes come to mine in the rearview mirror. A few seconds pass between us before she focuses back on the road. Weird.

"Hey, Jade, you know those varsity players we saw at the diner last week?" Sloane turns in her seat to look at me.

"Yeah?"

"Well, one of them has been asking about you."

I freeze. "What? How do you know?" My heart skips a few beats. I'm embarrassed by how attracted I am to him.

Sloane flashes her phone in front of my face. "Because I'm fucking his best friend, also known as the linebacker."

I roll my eyes. "You didn't take long."

"Would you expect anything less?" Sloane asks matter-of-factly.

"Actually, no." My thoughts begin drifting. I'm envious of Sloane. She has the life that people think I have.

"Anyway," she continues, handing me back the flask. "His name is Jensen Pracks. He's the star quarterback. You should stalk him on Instagram. He's already following you, and me, so let's take a selfie and upload it."

I take a long sip of the—whatever this is—and let her take the selfies, handing her back the flask as Nellie takes a turn onto an industrial street. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone, opening Instagram.

4 new followers. Three messages.

I ignore the messages and go to the followers. J_Pracks started following you. My thumb hovers over the follow back button.

“Fuck it.” I hit the button and then quickly shove my phone into my back pocket.

The car begins to slow outside trade buildings. Some mechanic garages, others I can’t make out at this time of night. Nellie pulls up to a high wired gate that takes up multiple spaces. It’s definitely the biggest area down this street. A young skinny guy and a bigger man stand guard at the front. I still can’t see that much, and I’m semi-distracted by Jensen. Jensen. Even his name is hot. Maybe I can play it out a bit. But broken girls like me don’t get perfection like Jensen. Boys like him are reserved for the girls like him.

The car is moving inside the gates now, where music is spilling out. To the right, there’s a long covered parking area where bikes are lined. So many bikes. Behind those, there’s a six-car shed. To the left, there’s another covered area where there’s a fighting octagon, tables and chairs, a boxing bag, and more people. In the middle, there’s a massive bonfire burning and behind that is a two-story house. It’s large, with a porch and a swing. It looks like something you would find in the suburbs, not down an industrial street. People spill out everywhere, with men in leather and women in—almost nothing.

I don’t register right away, and when I notice they’re wearing vests, I freeze. “Nellie!” I tap her shoulder. “Where are we?”

“You’ll see.” She winks at me.

They both climb out like it’s nothing and I hesitantly slip out behind Sloane. Shit. My red bottom heels click over the concrete ground as the heavy metal music wreaks havoc on my eardrums. Slipknot “Unsainted” is playing loud enough to raise hell. I take another step. Everything starts connecting in my head as I begin to make out the patch on one of the guy’s vests. It’s not until we’re directly at the

start of the side garage when I freeze, blood draining from my face. My hand shoots out to Sloane.

“I can’t be here!”

Sloane turns, rolling her eyes. She hooks her arm in mine, tucking it closer to her. That’s when I finally see what’s going on inside. Drunk bikers and naked women sucking off random body parts. There’s a large metal emblem hanging above the bar that reads:

Wolf Pack MC.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

My heart beats in my chest, my breathing matching every thud. I spin around to run out of the garage and find a different way home when I crash into a hard chest. An inferno of flames lick around my skin as the smell of rich cologne, subtle soap, burned cigarette, and worn leather infiltrate into me. I rub my cheek. “Sorry.” Then my eyes travel up, finding the patch, reading the same club words and Vice President underneath it, and then they go farther up, landing on—

“Royce...”

“Duchess.” His eyes go over my shoulder, and I turn to see who he’s looking at. He winks at Nellie, who raises her glass in the air. Then my eyes find Sloane, who is studying me with fearful eyes. Before I can bring my attention back to Royce, his lips find my ear and his voice coaxes me like an open box of memories. “So glad Nellie got you here safely...” I snap out of it, bringing my attention up to him. He leans down, so we’re eye level. “Heard you’ve been making new friends.”

“What!” I whisper, searching his eyes. “I’ll leave. I didn’t mean to come here.”

“Nah.” He chuckles. The slight enmity in his tone doesn’t go unnoticed. “You just got here.” His eyes find Sloane. “Sloane looks good too.”

"I'm leaving." I go to shove past him, but his arm flies out and before I can shove him away, he's tossing me over his shoulder. I heave at his shoulder pressing against my belly.

"No, you're not, Duchess." Then he drops me down onto one of the sofas that are tucked near the billiard table. "Billie!" he calls out, his eyes never straying from mine. "Make sure Sloane has a place to sleep."

No. No. I go to stand, but he rams me back down, his powerful arms rippling as they drop to either side of my body. "You will not fucking move, Duchess, and you will do as you're told."

"Or what?" I snap, tears building behind my eyes. I won't show him the pain that lies beneath my resentment. He'll only use that as a weapon.

His eyes search mine, a smirk flashing across his mouth. "Or I'll hurt you."

"You wouldn't," I say, swallowing past my nerves.

"Hmmm, there's so much you don't know about me now, Dutch." He leans down closer, the curve on the corner of his lips deepening. "*So. Fucking. Much.*" He pushes up from the sofa. "You'll be stayin' with me tonight. Don't fuckin' fight me on this." He disappears into the masses of people, making his way to the bar that's at the back. My eyes find Sloane instantly.

"I'm so sorry," I mouth, shaking my head.

She finally makes her way toward me, tearing herself out of the arms of whoever it is that has his hand around her arm. "We can run." She drops down on the sofa, her leg pressing against mine.

I shake my head, defeat seeping into my bones. "It won't matter. He will chase us. We'll just wait it out until morning." The bar to the back is made of wood, their Wolf Pack MC regalia hanging proudly on the wall. There's a vest in the middle, spread out open eagle. I want to study everyone, see what they look like, but the heavy atmosphere has me

going back and forth, not wanting to remain focused on one area for too long.

"Man," Sloane murmurs, crossing her leg on top of the other while unscrewing her flask. "I thought he would still be all about his little pet, but I am wrong."

I ignore her, thinking of ways that I can hopefully get us both out of this mess.

"Stay here." I stand from the sofa and shove through the swarm of bodies. The age difference is diverse, ranging from my age to our parents' age to older and younger. I head for the bar, because that's where I saw Royce head to when I slam into a rock-hard back.

"Sorry," I whisper, rubbing my head.

A man who looks to be in his late fifties is standing at the bar. He turns around to face me, and that's when I get a full view of him. His jaw is a little too square and his eyes are partially slanted. I thought there was something familiar about him until I realized he looks like Chuck Bass, only older and instead of the suit, he's wearing an MC cut.

"You must be Jade." His voice is soft, from years of being doused in smoke.

"Yes," I answer. "Sorry, I'm trying to find Royce."

He ignores me. "Name's Lion."

"Lion?" I ask, though I shouldn't. He's scary and not likely open to answering questions.

"Jade!" Royce snaps from behind me, taking my hand in his and pulling me away. "Stop fucking wandering off." Before I can argue, he's dragging me through the sea of bodies and taking me up toward a set of stairs that lead to a second level.

I yank my hand out of his grip. "Who do you think you are, Royce? You can't just force your way back into my life and hold me captive!" I reach inside my pocket, just as he slams the bedroom door closed behind us. "I'm calling Mom."

"Yeah?" His tone is menacing, the smug half-grin on his face too cocky to be the Royce I knew. The Royce that cared for me. I have to force everything inside of me to not shiver in fear. "Do it." He holds me to my spot with his glare. "See if she believes you."

My shoulders sag in defeat. "What happened to you?" I ask, searching his face. The face I once looked at for reassurance and strength is now the one I feel I should fear. Some people only get one monster in their lifetime, apparently, I have two.

"To me?" Royce kicks off the door and after a couple of steps, his biker boots are hitting the tip of my Louboutins. "You is what happened, Duchess." I can't fight it, and even if I wanted to, I couldn't force my eyes away from his. The depth of his blue is deep enough to drown me. "Get on the bed."

"Why am I here, though?" I ask, falling back onto the mattress. His room is decked out in black, Harley posters and there's even the shaft of a handlebar hanging above his bed. No porn posters—thank fuck he actually has taste—and no used condoms that I can see. Yet. Honestly, I wouldn't be ruling it out.

Royce takes out a pack of smokes from his back pocket and flips open the case to take one out. "You are the one who walked in here. So willing to make new friends. Nellie was a test to see how easily persuaded you could be, and I gotta say, Duchess, you fucking failed."

Leaning up, I snatch one out while scowling at him and put it into my mouth. He watches in fascination as I light the tip and inhale. "I've made a lot of friends since you've been gone, Roy." I inhale the cigarette before allowing the smoke to exit between my scarlet red lips. "So many."

He blazes the tip and sucks in deeply while remaining passive on me. I watch as the smoke curls around his nose, up past his eyes and over his head. "Hmmm."

"Hmm?" I cock my eyebrow. "That's it?" My fingers flex in the palms of my hands. "No, 'who the fuck are you talking to Jade'..."

Royce drags over the chair that's tucked beneath an office desk, taking a seat and resting his elbows on his knees. "Told you, don't give a fuck about you or that bullshit anymore. Do what you want, but don't make waves that will have those same waters spilling into my clubhouse. For years, people thought I was an orphan, with no family. Now you're in my city? You abide by my rules."

"How tragic." I drop the cigarette onto the carpet and squish it with the heel of my shoe. "You stole my life and I stole yours."

"Stop testing my patience, Jade."

I tilt my head. "Is there something that you know that I don't? You come back into my life after four years." I'm on my feet, walking around the room while touching pointless things. This isn't his room. Well, it is, but he doesn't live here. It's too impersonal for it to be Royce's full-time room.

"Duchess..." he mumbles my nickname, and my fingers momentarily pause over a stack of motorcycle magazines. "Dutch," he repeats, and this time I spin to face him.

"Fucking what, Royce?"

He stands to his full height—six foot something—and takes the two steps he needed to reach me. His fingers flex around the tip of my chin, tilting my head up so that my eyes collide with his. "I'm not the same boy you knew before." His touch is soft, yet his words harsh. "For one." I hold my breath as his eyes search mine. *So, so, blue.* His tongue sneaks out and glides over his teeth. "I'm meaner." He releases me, pushing me so hard that I fall back onto the bed. Before I can say anything else, he's on top of me with his hand covering my mouth. *Leather, cigarette, cologne.* I can't help it when the first tear sneaks out from the side of my eye, because he's right. I don't know who this man is staring down at me. The same vessel, different soul. The

man standing in front of me right now haunts me with his resemblance of the boy I knew.

His eyes narrow on mine before he pushes off from my body and stands back to his feet. His jaw flexes. "You can fucking leave if you want. Think my point is made." I've always been able to see when Royce is lying. His lies hang between the cracks that he keeps hidden from everyone.

Everyone but me.

So I see it. I see everything he hides. I stand back to my feet. *Compose yourself.* "Well, you've gotten theatrical with your tactics, I'll give you that."

There's a knock on the door. "Sicko!" a young voice bellows through the old wood. "Yo, we got a problem."

Royce studies my facial features, his eyes falling to my lips. "Don't fucking do anything to piss me off. I'm not a kid anymore. I will fuck you up." He reaches for the door handle and his face falls passive. As I make my way back down the wooden stairs, reacquainting myself with the stench of whiskey and cigarettes, I can't stop thinking about how much he has changed. I would have rather been left with the memory I had of him, than be tormented with this stranger. He used to smile cheekily, now he scowls and guards. His walls don't seem to shift around me anymore, and there's something in his eyes that is screaming at me to stay away. Something undeniably savage. Strolling past him and another biker I haven't met yet, I make my way back to find Sloane.

"Playa" by Tech N9ne is thumping through the speakers and before my eyes fly around the room in search of Sloane, her arm hooks in mine. "Okay, one, I can't believe I'm going to say this..." She gestures me toward the leather sofa that's hidden in the corner. The same one Royce pushed me into. This MC club isn't at all what I expected, and I'm not too sure what I did expect. Don't get me wrong, they're all scary in their own right, but they're also not unattractive. Even the old man I met, Lion, is good looking for his age.

"What are you going to say, Sloane?" I whisper, reaching for a bottle that's sitting on the coffee table in front of me. Vodka. Perfect.

"Royce is way hotter than he was four years ago—okay!" she exhales, tipping her head back to swallow whatever is in her glass. At what point should I cut her off? "I can't even deny it and I'm sorry."

I ignore her, leaning back against the sofa while blowing out an exhausted breath of air.

"He said he's not keeping us here. It was all some stupid test to see how gullible I am." It was the exact moment Nellie came up, hiding her face behind a bottle of pre-mixer.

I narrow my eyes. "Why?"

Nellie shrugs, dropping down onto the sofa beside Sloane. "What Sicko wants, Sicko gets. That's how it works around here." Her focus floats over my shoulder, a smile creeping onto her mouth. "How do you know him anyway?" Nellie asks, her eyes cutting back to me. I'm trying to figure out her move. She's probably sleeping with him. He has always had trouble keeping his dick dry, and Nellie is pretty. The fact that he's still playing his usual games, only a different level shouldn't bother me as much as it does.

I glare at her. "He's my brother, you dense bitch." My face remains frozen, bored.

"Reow." Nellie chuckles. "You guys don't look similar. Like, at all."

Sloane scoffs, shaking her head. She turns to face Nellie. "Question, do you and Royce have a little something going on?"

Nellie shakes her head. "No, but he does have a little whatever going on with someone else." She leans back on the sofa, sipping on her drink. "Pretty sure she thinks she's going to marry him or some shit."

My muscles seize. Just as Sloane whips her head to where I'm sitting. "Really?" She raises her eyebrows. "I can assure you, that is most likely about to change." I can feel

recklessness seep into my bones, my head pounding as quickly as my heart.

He still sleeps around. He may still be like that, but he has another thing coming if he thinks I'm the same girl who will tolerate the same shit. I'll lay another man flat on his back on the very same ground I used to worship Royce on.

I stand to my feet. "Nellie?"

"Yes, little one?"

I want to hit her. I have to force myself from not reaching across the room and punching her straight in the jaw.

I ignore her. "Take me to the bar."

Sloane smirks from behind the rim of her glass. "Atta girl."

I can feel almost every set of eyes on us while we head right for the bar. I don't know where Royce has gone, but there's one thing that I do know, and that's that no matter what he says, I don't think he would let anyone hurt me. He may be a cruel god, but he'd never let his disciples hurt me. At the very least, I'm willing to test that theory.

Nellie hands me a shot of vodka, for liquid courage, and points around the room.

"That's Lion," she says, rolling a new glass between her fingers. "He's the president and best friend of Sicko. They're so tight it turns me on." She pauses, pointing to another. "That's Gypsy. He's a total fucking idiot who manages to sleep with Victoria's Secret models on the weekends—and that's no lie—before dealing with club business right after. Pretty boy." Nellie's eyes fly to the man beside Gypsy. "And that is Wicked." As soon as the name leaves her lips, I find myself watching his mouth move.

Wicked.

Oh.

"Hmmm," I murmur, tilting my head. "Interesting. Tell me about Wicked..." Something that doesn't involve how I know him. As I take in Wicked's hard features and stone-cold eyes, my stomach flips. As if sensing my gawking, he turns

his head, his dark ink hair glossing against the lighting. He wears a white shirt beneath his leather vest and loose black jeans with cuts on the knees. His combat boots are tied loosely at his feet, the dried mud over the rubber edges displaying how dirty he obviously gets.

Hmmm.

“Wicked doesn’t really talk. He addresses people by his movements, unless you’re one of the holy ones that he speaks to, which is usually only the brothers. The disrespect is real with that one, so I wouldn’t even try.”

Even more interesting. “Spend Some Time” by Eminem is beating against the walls, matching my pulse.

“You don’t say.”

Wicked’s eyes are on mine and my stomach hits the floor as he directs his bleak orbs down my body, right to the tips of my toes. I feel the tingles fizzle through my veins as he slowly brings his ice blues back up, thick lashes fanning over his high cheekbones. Wicked is probably by far one of the most beautiful looking male specimens I have ever seen. Royce is a nightmare wrapped in a dream, but Wicked is the Devil’s pet.

Tipping back my head to swallow my tequila, or rum, or whatever, I bring my eyes to Nellie and away from Wicked. “Interesting.”

“Wicked? No. Nope. He’s pretty to look at, but Sicko is more my speed.”

I can’t help it, and with all the alcohol pulsing through my veins, I can’t stop it. Laughter rolls out of my mouth.

“Something funny?” Nellie asks, as if insulted. She should be. I’m straight-up laughing at her.

“No.” I look to Sloane, ignoring Nellie. “Ready to go?”

She watches me with careful eyes, aware of my sudden shift in attitude. “Okay.”

After sneaking out of the clubhouse and catching an Uber, I’m once again back in the safety of my covers in my

dorm. I feel as though I'm finally able to catch up with everything that happened tonight. From thinking Royce had kidnapped me, to seeing Wicked. My phone vibrates on top of my dresser, and I grab at it to see I have missed a couple of text messages. Seeing an unknown number, I open that one first.

We're not done.

I chew on my bottom lip, the light from my phone killing my vision. I move away from his to one from James.

Be ready by six tomorrow. Expect a parcel.

I exhale, my fingers hovering over Royce's text. Before I can stop myself, my fingers are flying over my screen furiously.

We were done the day you left me.

I think about waiting for his reply, with a belly full of anxiety, but before I can drop my phone back onto my bedside table and get some much-needed sleep, he texts back.

Yeah?

I ignore his vague text, shoving my phone under my pillow and finally resting my eyes.

My legs were stretched wide, spread by a metal bar that seemed to extend wider the more I moved. His fingers flexed over the inside of my thigh while his other hand held a tumbler glass of probably the finest Irish whiskey. When my eyes drifted down to his hand, he brought it up to my chin and yanked my face back to his. Gagged and tied to a bed at a lavish hotel that would charge for one night what most people would for an entire year. He didn't hold back.

Squeezing roughly, his dark eyes danced with greed. This was the third time that this had happened, that he had had his hands on me without my approval. Every time he does,

he takes a part of my soul and leaves an emotional scar with his departure.

"You're going to be my perfect little bunny, Jade. Did you know that?" My eyes watered as his hand went back down to my inner thigh, my damp lashes fanning out over my cheeks. I didn't know that. Not at all, but I was beginning to realize it.

He placed his drink down onto the floor before standing back to his full height. James was every bit as intimidating as I could ever think he could be. My mind wasn't equipped with what he was capable of. Not yet.

His long fingers flexed over the buckle of his belt, as he pulled it off. He moved to the buttons of his suit shirt and his six-pack abs were displayed from behind the material.

"You want this, Jade." He tossed his shirt onto the floor before flicking open the button to his pants. "I can see it in the way your eyes move over my body. You want this as badly as I do, and I'm going to give it to you." He leans down, fist down onto the mattress and slowly crawls up my body until he's resting in the apex of my thighs. He runs the tip of his nose over my neck. "Mmmm, you smell so sweet, little Bunny. How I'm going to teach you every little thing there is to know about me and what I do, and do you know what you're going to do?"

I didn't answer. One, because I'm gagged, but two, because I didn't want to. I removed myself from these situations. He may have my body at his mercy, but he will never have my mind.

The thick tip of his penis pressed against the entrance of my hole. "You're going to help me." He sunk himself inside of me and I cried out loudly even though it was muffled by the gag.

I lost my virginity to this prick, and now he uses me as his toy. I've thought about going to the police multiple times, but I remember the one time I did and saw James talking with all of the officers outside the precinct. As if he

knew that I was going to at the very least try to talk with someone about it.

There was no coming out of his shadows, so the best I could do now was blend in.

He kissed me passionately, making love to me. I remained passive, blocking out what was happening. Once he was done, he peeled his sticky body off mine and reached for his cigar holder in his side pocket. Taking one out, his eyes remaining on mine, he lit the end, and then lights the bottom of the metal holder, and before I can comprehend what he is doing, he pressed the scorching hot metal to the inside of my lower ankle and I once again cried out in agony, lost within the cloud of my pain.

"You're always going to be mine now. When people see that? They're going to know they can't fucking touch you."

I move through my new classes fluidly, but I find myself unsettled. Like there's so much to unravel before I can focus solely on why I'm here. I expected for James and me to be done once I left Stone View. I should have known better.

My hand skims over the parcel that was left for me at the front desk, the gold and red ribbons slipping over the palm of my hand. Why. Why does he do this to me? And why am I not so bothered by it anymore? The biggest secret I've ever held was the one of James and I. Silenced, but not sure why.

I flip off the lid and shake my head. "Green. Of course." I touch the silk gown and take it out of the box. The PRADA label that is embedded into the underbed of the box isn't surprising at all. James goes all out. Always. I lick my bottom lip and take my dress to the bathroom, turning on the faucet to my private shower. I am grateful for my own amenities, but I'm also not sold on the fact that he didn't have something to do with it, so no one questions my whereabouts.

Quickly scrubbing up in the shower, I dry my body off and rub potent scented lotion into my skin. I've only got an

hour to get ready. I continue to do my makeup and hair. Brushing on thick foundation and a strong smoky eye, I line my lips in army green before sliding a matte style lipstick over them. I gather my makeup into a pile and take myself in in the mirror. Tightened beneath my breasts to spill them over the edge, while the waist is clenched in tightly, accentuating my already hourglass shape. The backs have little black feather wings where straps should be. It's nice. I'll give him that. When there's a knock on the door, my muscles tighten, snapping my shoulders straight. Showtime.

The night is placid, but the midnight sky does nothing to blanket the nerves that are wracking through my body, sizzling me from the tips of my fingers to the ends of my toes.

"Where we are going tonight," James murmurs, pulling his Maserati onto the freeway. Soft classical music is filling the car. I hate classical music now. "I will need you on your best behavior."

Running my tongue over the inside of my lip, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"This place," James says, looking out over his arm to the oncoming traffic. "It's called L'artisaniant. Selected people are invited to join, and I just so happened to be asked. I need you on your best behavior." I watch out of the corner of my eye as his fist tenses around his steering wheel. Cracking his neck, he turns to face me.

"And who do they think I am?" I ask, struggling to hold in my sass.

"They think you're my toy, which is exactly what you are." My jaw tightens as he continues to drive. I can feel my phone vibrating in my black Louis Vuitton trunk clutch and I have to fight the will to answer it. After four years of being handled by James, he has somehow conditioned me to bend at his will. Ruling over me with an iron fist, I learned rather quickly that the harder I fought, the harder the punishment

which means the softer the sex. If I'm his toy, then I'm a caged lioness with no will to be saved or to run.

"And may I ask who is who?" I say, testing his patience.

James shakes his head, pulling down a dark, private road and stopping outside a large wired gate. Dark spikes stretch up to the heavens in pointed gothic spikes, but the thick shrubs and trees hide any view from seeing farther in. Before he drew his window down to speak into a small white voice box, he pins me with dominant eyes. "No. It's all private. You have to understand this, Jade. To be invited to L'artisanant is a high honor. Only the most influential people in the world are selected to join."

I ponder over his words, chewing on my bottom lip. "So this is your first time?"

James' lips curve and I watch as the wrinkles around his mouth crinkle beneath the pressure. I've thought about the reason as to why he did what he did to me and why he's doing this to me—multiple times—and all I can think is it comes down to what he introduced to me after scarring my ankle all those years ago. The scar is small and naked to the human eye unless you're looking for it, but the invisible scarring it has left on my heart is enough to make up for it. What I walked into. I'm thankful that I haven't been back in a couple months, but he has made it clear that another gathering is happening and it's happening sooner than I thought, which can only mean one thing.

New meat.

"Yes. You'll be wearing a mask in here." He takes two leather cases out from his side door and hands one to me. "Put it on now and keep it on at all times. Do you understand?" He opens his box and slides his over his face. It wraps around his face like a second skin, stopping above his lips.

When I take mine out of the box, I'm not at all surprised to see that it's leather. Not what he usually has me wear, but still leather.

"I can't imagine what they might want with you," I whisper, and before I can choke back the words and swallow them back down my throat, they're already out there in the open, being inhaled by my enemy. I busy myself with fixing my mask onto my face as he turns, hitting the button to wind his window down. He either didn't hear me or I will pay for it later. There's never an in between with him.

"Every time your thighs clench for another man, you will know it was me who put that hunger there. I tore your innocence open." James was a vicious bastard, but he was a bastard that not even I could win against. Not ever. There's no point saving the doomed, because the doomed don't know how to exist without the curse that they've been under once they've been there for too long.

The gates split open with a squeak and he presses his foot on the pedal to drive us forward. Dimming the headlights, we continue down the long cobblestone driveway at a slow speed. My stomach is twisting in knots and my heart is beating too fast.

I swipe my sweaty palms down my thighs as we roll to a stop. The driveway curves in a full circle, with dark wood steps leading to the main door. The house is modern and executive with glass panes at the front and a single wooden door. It's probably the most interesting house I have ever seen. Not a single speck of color, or nail of wood. It's all glass. A solitary man stands at the front of the door, dressed in full military attire, with an AK strapped to his side.

Straightening my shoulders, I tilt my head. "Is this usual?"

When I climb out of the car and James comes to the other side of me, his arm hooks in mine. "Yes. What happens behind these doors make it necessary."

"And what is it that happens behind these doors?" I ask, intrigue eating away at my thoughts. "Just to prepare myself."

James doesn't answer, he merely directs us to the front of the house. He does this a lot. He will either answer me or ignore me, both sides of that tend to grate on my nerves.

The man at the door is older, with a shaved head and angry, unsettled eyes. He reminds me of who Royce is right now, filled with uncertainty that swims beneath the surface of pretty blue eyes.

"Go ahead." He steps aside after James takes back his hand. Just as I'm about to follow James through the wood doors, a heavy hand is planted against my chest, pausing my movements.

I gaze down at it. "Excuse me?" I want to tell him to get his paws off my tits, but figure that will get me yet another gag-worthy love fest once I'm alone with James again, and there's only so much I can take when it comes to it.

"The girls need to be branded," the officer—Nomad—says. *Nomad?* Is that his name? Why can't I be ho-ing in college like Sloane? I stop the thoughts treading their angry feet through my brain.

"What brand?"

James' jaw tenses a few times. "Is it necessary for her? She's only my plus one." James unbuttons his jacket, coming closer to military dude. Interesting. It's not every day he has to throw weight to get what he wants.

"Afraid so. The rules are quite clear that no one is to set foot inside L'artisanant without the mark."

"The what?" I panic, my eyes flying between the two of them.

James grabs my hand and turns, lifts my arm in the air. "Beside the armpit. I don't have all night."

Military man pulls out what looks like a tiny stamp. It has crusted gold plating over the handle and cursive writing that I can't read over the tip. Fire ripples over my skin and turns all of my nerves to ash as he releases me. I gaze down to see a burn mark now fresh beneath my arm. It's small,

maybe the size of a nickel, but the intricate lines that swish into what looks like a scribble is well pressed into my flesh.

I tilt my head. "What?"

J is tugging me through the front doors before I can wrap my head around what just happened.

It was dark. So dark that the chandelier which hangs from the marble ceiling was the only thing that was struck by the full moonlight breaching through the drapes. Thick, blood-red curtains shaded the lounge room, and four men sat at chairs, their legs thrown over their thighs.

Not one caught my eye. I had never seen them in my life, and up until last month, James had been training me.

Splitting me open and fucking me until my insides were sushi and the only name that fell from my lips was his, and the syllables weren't laced with love, or passion. They were poisoned by the hate that pulsed through my veins.

He thought he had conditioned me to handle his brutality, which in essence he had, but he forgot one of the most important things of all.

Cruelty hardens the skin to which it is pounded upon, so he wasn't only grooming me to become—what he says—his sex slave. But he was also handing me the nails to which I needed to build up my walls.

The collar pinched my neck as he tugged on the chain. "Gentlemen..."

They all seemed to shuffle in their seats before my eyes found the ground. I knew better than to pay attention to anything and everything that happens around me.

I wasn't to look at anyone.

I wasn't to touch anyone.

I was to allow people to touch me—anyone. Whoever James said could, would. Whoever. Whenever. Though we hadn't taken that step yet—until tonight—I was well trained on what I should and should not do in the presence of whoever he took me to.

"Diamond..." one of the men purred. I couldn't see him, but the rasp in his voice illustrated how many cigarettes he had smoked in his lifetime.

"Gentlemen..." James said, but I kept my eyes on my toes. White as snow, to signify purity. The day after James took my virginity, I started my white nail polish trend.

"You brought us a gift? You shouldn't have." Goose bumps rose over my skin as the other man's voice drifted through the space between us.

"Not tonight," J's authoritative voice boomed through, and it's then that I got the first hint that maybe, just maybe, he ran this ship too.

He tugged on my collar and I fell forward, dropping to my knees. Carpet burn tore through my skin as his fist found my hair and he gently caressed it. As though a lover would. As though he doesn't ruin my mind anytime we're alone together.

"Tonight, you will all have the privilege to watch me, but none of you will touch." He pauses, and I still haven't raised my head up to see the other four older men. After a series of grunts and approvals, he releases my head. "Very good. First, we will handle business."

Finally, I look out the corner of my eye when movement catches my attention. Another room adjacent to this one is in view, hidden behind a curtain. There was a girl curled up in the corner, afraid. Where she is is obviously the main area and we're in a private room.

There were a sea of bodies inside. Young girls, old men. The nature was obvious. As quickly as I stole a peek, my eyes snapped back to the ground and I followed the pattern of the carpet.

Just who the hell is James?

They spoke back and forth with one another, with each passing minute indenting carpet patterns into my knees. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, James shook the collar, bringing me back to my feet. My long brown hair fell

over my slender shoulders. My collarbones were too sharp, my skin a shade too pale. My tummy rumbled as I thought about the food I haven't had in three days. I was midway through punishment for attending a party with Sloane, at which James assumed I had slept with someone else. If I didn't tell him the name of this mystery man I had supposedly slept with, I had to go seven days without food. I was allowed water, but only by his control. Some days I would barely get a drip. Today was one of those days. I barely had the strength to stand on my own feet, so for once, I was thankful for the collar.

I followed behind him into the room. The scent of sweat and a sweet-scented oil drowns my senses. I almost trembled right there when James led me through the sea of bodies and to the other side of the room. Dark walls bleed with the blue LED lighting. There's a circle bar in the middle, multiple stools tucked beneath it, and lounges and sofas lined out through the room. In every corner, someone was having sex.

I wanted to know why I was here and what this place was. I raised my head and caught that same young girl curled up in the corner, sweat matting her blonde strands to her forehead. Instantly, she found me. Pain flashed over her doe eyes as her lip trembled. My mouth fell open, willing words to come out for her. Needing them to come out for her. Even if it was just a small reassuring smile. You're not alone, I wanted to say. Her forehead dropped to her knees as she turned her head side to side. She was in a bad way, even I could see.

"Come forward, Jade. Don't be afraid." But I was. His words meant nothing to me. Every flick of lighting, rhythm of whatever song that was playing, and breath I took, I feared him and what he was capable of. Pushing open a door, painted in the darkest black, he gestured inside, dropping the leash. "Enter. I will be back in a second."

I did as I was told, falling forward and dropping to my knees in the center of the room. Dark-colored dots flashed around the area, my breathing labored.

The lighting here is soft, translucent enough to ease the nerves of anyone that may be anxious. I wonder if they created it this way. To make people feel warm and welcome. As soon as we enter, James directs us down a long corridor until we're met with a glass door, frosted over the base so we can't see through.

"Is this like The Complex?" I ask absently, studying the door like it's the hardest test in history. After my first night working with James, I learned what he did and where he did it. It was called The Complex.

"No," James murmurs. "This is different. You won't need your collar, and you are free to roam." There was only one other time I was free to roam. "They're not in my line of business."

The doors split open and I'm instantly sucked into a dark vortex of sin.

Bodies move around the room as soft music plays softly, each beat and note grazes down my arm in warning. It feels sexy and dark, not somewhere I particularly want to be a part of with James. People are having sex on couches, others are drinking at the bar, and some are right in the middle of the room in a damp tangle of sweaty limbs, rubbing each other all over.

My thighs clench. Before I can cement my feet to the ground, James is whipping me into the room with his hand securely at my lower back. "No one knows who runs this. They never show their face or mingle with their guests." The collar he uses with me for work is dangling in front of my body, unlatched from his grip. If you didn't know what it was, you would assume it's an accessory. For a split second, all I can hear is the deep gasps of me reaching for air. The atmosphere is intense.

He continues to direct me through the swarm of people, until he reaches another set of doors. This time, he pushes me forward once they're open and I fall into a dark room on my knees, hitting the carpet with a thud. The doors close behind me, and I quickly try to reassess my surroundings. Everything is pitch black. I can't see any fucking thing. Curling my hands into fists, I cuss under my breath. My heartbeat is erratic, my palms pulsing in sweat. The carpet patterns are indenting into my knees, but I know better than to move.

I itch to reach behind my leather mask and scratch under my eye, but I don't.

That's when I hear the shuffle in the corner.

My blood turns cold. He leaves me in a dark room in a house I don't know, during a party that is dripping with all things sinister, and now I'm pretty sure someone is in this room with me. I should be surprised, but I'm not. I know better when it comes to James.

My fingers tingle as I feel body heat swim around in front of me. If I lean forward, I'm almost certain I'd collide with whoever it is. I feel the warm mist of someone's breath falling over my lips and my insides short circuit. My lips part slowly. I'll just ask who's there. Who James has left me with. Just as I'm about to allow the words to fall from my mouth, I feel that same fog but only this time, it's on the back of my neck.

Oh my fucking god. How many are in here? My eyes close and my head tilts to the side, my breathing becoming harder, more desperate. There have been times where James has shared me, and there has been another time where he did more than that, but none of all those times felt like this. I don't know if it's because I came in reckless and in a mood to party, or that it just feels different in this house. The person behind me moves lower, down the nape of my neck as the one in front of me remains right there. The tip of a finger glides down from the front of my throat,

slowly grazing against my sternum. I can't breathe. Holding any oxygen I have left inside of me, I attempt to catch up with myself, maybe talk myself down, but it's too late. My thighs clench and my belly shakes with a disturbing amount of lust.

Opening my mouth again, I'm ready to ask who is there, but my voice is cut out when three clock bells sound off in the room.

Ding... Ding... Ding...

It was a rusted ding, reminding me of an old church waking at midnight.

A voice comes through next. Maybe the bell was sounded through a speaker system throughout the house? Damn James for him not telling me more about L'artisaniant.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The voice sounds unfamiliar. Every syllable is said through a device to distort it into a tone that sounds way too close to Billy the Puppet.

"Welcome to L'artisaniant. If you're here tonight, you already know what we are, but not who we are. When you walked through our doors and gained your stamp, you signed away your right to speech. Leave your donations at the door on your way out, and remember, don't go too far into the house. Each level is categorized by what it is you think you can handle. Each level has its own cost. The higher you go, the more expensive it becomes. Everyone has their kink, but I can assure you that niveau quatre is not it. With each level, there is one of us walking among you. As you know, no one has ever seen *les quatre sangs* before, and that is how it will remain." He takes a short breath, chuckling.

"And may the odds be ever in your favor."

Why did that sound like a challenge? The bells sounded out again, each one hitting the chords of my soul and vibrating over my skin on its way out. What level am I on right now?

"Bet she wants to know what level she's on..." the voice behind me says, and I freeze. In the back of my mind, his voice absorbs into a hidden part of my brain. I don't think much of it. When your sight is taken from you, you'd be surprised by how distorted everything becomes. A blur. Confusing. Do we grasp on to sound or scent? His tone is dark and gravelly. As if he smokes too many cigarettes. But it's also smooth and sensual, like he drowns in expensive whiskey. Whoever is in front of me doesn't answer.

My heartbeat quickens, sweat dripping down my chest.

"Why were you left in a dark room with two hungry wolves?" Lips scrape over the back of my neck. "Tell me." He flicks his tongue over the nape as I sink my teeth into my lower lip, attempting to hide the hungry moan from escaping. "Are you ready to be fucked within an inch of your life?"

Blowing out a steady breath, I wish for words to come, but they never do.

"I've had worse," I whisper, barely audible.

"Is that a challenge?" the guy in front of me mumbles over my lips. "Because I can meet a fucking challenge." Is this what they do here? Fuck each other in dark rooms?

My legs tremble with pleasure and they've barely touched me. I tilt my head to the side as the guy who is behind me sinks his teeth into where my neck meets my shoulder. A sharp sting shoots out where his teeth are, but instead of flinching away from the pain, I relish in it. I want to soak it in and drown in it. James has never been rough with sex, and the people who he passed me off to he told to be the same—bar one. This feels different. It lights a fire inside of my tired soul, stirring the hunger I hide deep in my belly that has always wanted to expose itself.

"Fuck, you taste good." He growls over my flesh. I quiver in the spot, chills wreaking havoc over my body. Music plays through the speakers. Not too loud, but loud enough to get

lost in it. I recognize it instantly. “Bad for Me” by guccihighwaters.

“Fuck,” the voice behind me growls. “What’s your name?” His hand slips beneath the bottom of my dress, his fingertips grazing my inner thighs. Moisture pools between my legs as I grind forward. I’m panting, sweating, and building to explode.

“I—” The man in front of me reaches forward and yanks down the front of my dress. Warmth coats the bead of my nipple as his tongue swirls over the nub. “Oh fuck,” I whisper, my head falling backward onto the guy behind me.

“Touch me,” he grinds out behind me. “You’re fucking demure. You need to change that.”

I don’t answer, overwhelmed with all of my sensitivities coming to life.

Reaching backward, my palm hits a rock-hard chest. Abs built like bricks jagged over my palm.

“Lower,” he growls softly, his mouth opening against my back. *Jesus Christ, who is this man?* I scratch my nails down his abdomen, reaching the band of his jeans. Finding the button, I flick it open as the mouth on my nipple sucks harder, his other hand coming to my other breast. Moaning, I press my ass against the man behind me, his thick girth burying between the crack of my ass cheeks.

His fingers dip beneath my panties. “I’ll give you two options.” His voice conjures all of my ghosts and brings them horny and raging to the surface. “Do you want to be fucked or do the fucking?”

I think over his words, playing with them inside of my head. When it comes down to my needs and what I’ve liked about this so far, it all comes down to one thing. “I want to feel good. But I need it to hurt.”

He doesn’t recoil from my words, and the man in front of me unlatches his mouth from around my nipple with a clench of his teeth. He hisses. “Oh, so you like pain?”

I gulp, refusing to let the words leave my mouth. Refusing to admit my confession. The way my clit pulses at the word is enough to make me feel dirty and corrupt. Not the kind of dirty that you can scrub off in the shower, but the kind that digs its claws into your watered-down soul.

When I don't answer, the man behind me cups my whole pussy in his hand and pulls me to my feet with him. I continue to be blinded by darkness, music thumping and now my skin slick with sweat.

Once we're on our feet, the man in front of me pulls down my dress until it's at a pool at my feet. My stomach shudders nervously, my pussy throbbing. So different to James. Does sex exist like this? Before the thought can simmer in my mind, the man behind me is picking me up from the ground and spinning me around to face him. He's greedy, I sense, which I like. He gives off a dominating vibe. We fall backward until he hits a wall with a thud, his hand still cupping my pussy. My fingers search his face. Short hair, strong, sturdy facial structure. I dip into the curve of his cheekbones, his soft lips that puff out over the rim a little. He doesn't move, his breath no longer falling on my face. It's different this time, since we're facing each other—but again without seeing each other. He's holding my naked body in his hands, but why do I feel like he can see right through my soul. Moving my fingertip lower, I run it over his sharp jaw, and down to his nipple. A ring pierces his left pec, with a bar going through and two jewelry pieces hanging off. I have to fight the urge to nibble on it. It's not until the other man comes up from behind me that we both begin breathing again, as if we forgot where we were. Bringing my finger back to his mouth, the curves of his soft lips curl up in a grin, and my stomach hits the ground. Butterflies fly around in my belly and ignite a wind storm that reaches down to the tips of my toes.

That was a creepy smirk.

My mouth opens and I lean forward, ready to kiss him. I don't know why I want to kiss him, it's probably way too intimate for what we're about to do—he hikes me up in a rush, lifting me so that my legs need to wrap around his neck. The kind of strength a man needs to lift any girl in this way is enough to—*holy fuck*. His slick tongue touches my clit and my brain short circuits.

"Oh!" My legs tighten around his neck as my fingers dive into the loose strands of his hair. I've never, not once, had this happen to me. James only took what he wanted and would please him, he was never interested in oral sex on me. Fire burns through my veins as I sink deeper and deeper into the unknown.

His tongue moves with force, slick and wet. "I'm going to get you good and wet, and then we're both gonna fuck you. Ever done anal?"

I nod my head before I remember he can't see me. "Yes. Multiple times."

"Sluts get fucked like sluts. Ever been double-parked?" It takes me a little longer to understand what he's actually asking me.

"Ah, no..."

"Mmm, maybe not quite as dirty as I thought you were..." He sucks on my clit with enough force to have me reaching for my release. "Too bad that's about to change." His tongue dives into my entrance and my head tilts back, my hair long since falling out of its perfect chiffon bun. My release drips over my inner thighs and I feel his tongue curl around each bead of liquid, licking up every last drop. He pauses before he reaches my most deadly secret, and I freeze momentarily. He slides me down his thick body and I fall to the floor at his feet, sandwiched between two bodies that I can't see. One hand reaches out to the man I'm most acquainted with, while the other absently searches for the other. *Please don't be as big as this one.* When my hand

connects with his chest, I'm shit out of luck because every muscle swells out of his skin.

Shit.

Think, Jade, think.

I drop to my knees and blindly reach for the other man's crotch, fiddling with his zipper. "Eager much?" he grunts, but lets me tug them down around his ankles. With my other hand, I reach for the main man, doing the same, pulling his jeans down. Breathing in and out, I reach for both of their cocks and... *I'm going to die.*

Pulling out the main guy at the same time as the other, I pump the other's thick shaft in the palm of my hand, swelling and throbbing every second. With the main guy, I run the tip of my thumb over his head, swiping the bead of cum that has surfaced and sucking it into my mouth. I realize they can't see what I just did, but I'm pretty good at blow jobs.

"That taste good?" he asks, his hands in my hair.

I freeze, not wanting him to be gentle with my hair. It's something James does. Just as the thought enters my mind, he yanks on it roughly, pulling me closer to his cock. The salty residue sticks to the back of my throat. He slaps me hard across my cheek with his heavy piece.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth harder than you fucked mine." Leaning down, I flatten out my tongue and press it against his balls, before sliding it up his shaft all while pumping the guy's next to me.

"Slap me again," I say, my hand diving between my thighs. A fist is in my hair as he whacks me across my cheek again. My pussy clenches, a moan slipping from my lips. Diving my finger inside of myself, I bring it to the other guy's cock and use my cum as lube to pump his cock. "Shit."

Main guy hisses—*fucking hisses*—and I almost flatline. It was the sexiest sound in the damn world. I want to hear more. Sucking him into my mouth through my soft lips, I

take him in deeper, until I feel his tip hit my tonsils. His grip tightens as my pumping gains speed on the other. I go farther, swallowing him whole before swirling my tongue on the way out. I grip him around his cock and pump him before going to the other.

They're both similar in size from what I can feel—and that's a whole lot—but I would say the main guy is heavier, a tinge thicker. Angrier. Swallowing him suffocated me.

I move between the two of them, sucking them both into my mouth. It doesn't take long before the main guy gets agitated and yanks me to my feet by my hair. It was unexpected and hot, sending need and want pooling between my legs. He could get rougher, I can feel it. He's holding back.

"Touch your toes."

I stand to my feet, sensing both men towering over me. "Make me."

Hands clench around my cheeks roughly, shoving my face to his. Main guy again. The dude has issues, clearly, and it just so happens that I want to work them out. "You probably shouldn't push limits with a man who doesn't have any."

My heart races, my thighs clenching. "Neither. Do. I."

He shoves me forward until I crash into the wall, smacking my face against it. His hand is at the back of my neck, squeezing so tight I need to curl backward before a muscle pops out. He runs his other hand down the curve of my spine before cupping my pussy from behind. "Gonna fuck you while I think of someone else."

"Funny." I run my tongue over my swollen lip, wincing slightly when I feel the fresh cut and tang of metal touch the tip of my tongue. "Same."

Directing my head forward, he bends me over until I'm touching the straps of my heels. I wait a couple of seconds before I feel a tongue tracing up my inner thigh from the back. He pulls me backward farther, until the other guy is in

front of me, his fingers twisting in my hair as he tears out what's left of my ties and pulls me into his crotch. He grips his cock with one hand and before I can see, he slaps me across the cheek with a heavy slap. My thighs clench, sticking together from my dampness.

"That got you all wet, huh?" main guy says from behind, his finger sinking between my folds. "You might last the night after all." Sucking the guy in front of me into my mouth, the other one extracts his finger and I wait (im)patiently for him to suck on my clit again. Warmth flicks over my anal entrance and I freeze my movements. Unsure how I feel about him tonguing my asshole.

"Do I need to beat you into submission?" he asks, continuing with the same tormenting flick of his tongue. His fingers dig into my hips as his tongue finally dives into my ass. The sensation is not something I'm sure I like, or hate, and I don't know why he's doing it and why he doesn't just fuck me there. He must stand to his feet because a loud slap vibrates over my ass cheek, stinging me instantly. It feels good, so fucking good, but I need more.

More pain.

"You want me to fuck you?" he asks, and I cry out when he slaps me again, in the same place. "Answer me."

"Yes," I whisper.

Another slap. "And you want my friend here to take you too?"

Another slap, this time I could swear I feel my skin split open. "Yes!" I scream, sweat trickling down my temple.

"Good," he says, with another slap, but this time over my pussy. I throb instantly, releasing drips of cum down my thigh. "Because there's no safe word in here." He rubs me over my cleft, massaging softly as I feel the tip of his cock push against my entrance. In the midst of the chaos, he obviously put on a condom. Gripping my hips, he thrusts into me instantly, tearing me wide open to accommodate his girth.

"So fucking tight." He pulls out, runs his damp cock all over my pussy and crack of my ass, before diving back in and pumping me in rhythm. Unable to offer myself the release I ache to feel, I pull the other guy in closer, swallowing him whole while the main guy hammers me from behind. Deep, hard thrusts with enough force to hit the edge of my cervix.

He pulls out again and I suck the tip off of the other guy. The sound of him spitting is the only thing I hear before saliva slips down the crack of my ass with his finger following its trail. The tip of his cock pushes against the entrance of my ass and I tense slightly, afraid of the sheer size of him and the teeny gap of my hole.

He slaps me hard across the ass with one hand and bundles up my hair with his other. "Relax." When I don't, he tugs on my hair and my neck stretches backward, making it hard to swallow the cum that's sliding down my throat. "Fucking relax." My muscles release around his size as he inches further and further inside of me. I've done anal. A lot. James loves anal almost as much as he loves sex, and I don't mean just with his cock, so taking it isn't a problem—usually, but this man is big. I don't even know his name. Once he's buried deep in my ass, he pulls out, lifts me around the waist and turns me around to face him again. The way he handles me is alarming, as if I weigh almost nothing. Sucking my nipple into his mouth, he enters me as the guy behind me presses the tip of his now condom-clad cock against the entry of my ass.

I suck in a deep breath as they both sink inside of me.

"Oh." A yelp escapes my mouth when they're both entering and my arms fly around the main guy in front of me, my teeth sinking into the side of his neck. Metallic liquid touches my tongue as I swallow his guttural hisses. He pumps in and out a couple times all while the guy behind me grunts, slowly sinking into my asshole. They both thrash

into me relentlessly, my eyes rolling to the back of my head in pleasure.

Confusion.

I squeeze the main guy closer and without thinking, my lips find his. He doesn't open them, doesn't move. It almost gets ridiculous that I keep my lips on his because he's not reciprocating, so I move back and suck down on his neck. Not everyone likes kissing. I get it.

My legs shake as they continue. It's not until I'm screaming through my release that he falls backward, landing on a sofa. They both remain inside of me, this time I'm riding the main guy with the other behind me.

Main guy's hands squeeze around my thighs as he slams me deeper over his cock. He grips me from my cheeks and brings my face lower than his. "Open."

I do.

Saliva slides inside my mouth as the guy behind fucks me harder. I clench around them, my body preparing to fall beneath their hands again. Yet again. I don't know if I'd be able to handle yet another orgasm, but I chase it anyway.

"Slap me," I whisper, rolling my body over him.

He slaps me across my face before grabbing my tit and pulling me into his mouth. He bites down on my nipple and I lose it. The guy behind me pulls out of my ass and after a few seconds, his hot cum is squirting over my back as the main one beneath me grunts and groans through his release, with my nipple still between his teeth.

I've been flipped, slapped, pulled, and fucked until my legs shook, bruises welt my skin—I'm sure—and blood stains are smeared over my body.

We all fall in silence, so I curl up on the ground, attempting to catch my breath. I'm met with silence as they both gather up their things and the door opens and closes and I'm alone again.

Alone.

Left with nothing but the memories of what just happened. *That just happened.* I smirk to myself, my tongue running over my bottom lip. I can still taste them both on my skin, smell the scent of their sex in the air. They've left me with a hunger that can never be satiated. *I want them back.*

Doing the best that I can with no sight, I gather up my dress and squeeze it onto my body just as the door flies back open and a light turns on. I smile, finally able to see who these two men are, but when I turn to face them, it's James. My heart crashes to the floor.

"Oh, hi," I say, zipping up the rest of my dress.

He takes one step inside, and then another. "Have a good time tonight, Jade?"

My throat is dry, my mouth parched, so I run my tongue over my lips. "I—"

"Jade..." he says, his eyes flashing with coldness that drips down my spine and lands at my lower back. "I told you that you were free to roam tonight."

He releases the tie around his neck, tossing it onto the ground. It's the first time I get a good look at the room and the current state of my dress. There are tears at the ends, my hair is a knotted nest around my shoulders, and my hands have blood on them. I wince when I touch the inside of my thigh. I feel like a kid in a candy store, finding sex for the first time. I've never known it to be this way. Pleasurable. Enjoyable. J's eyes roam up and down my body. The thought of him being on top of me so soon after having sex with two strangers constricts my throat and I have to force myself not to dry retch. *Don't fucking touch me.*

The room is a dark shade of blue, the walls bleeding into an ombre of gray. There's a king-size bed in the corner with four posters holding it up. On the other side of the bed, there's a Victorian-style sofa with buttons sewn into the cushions, and on the other side of the wall, there is a range

of ornaments and utensils hanging. Obviously more on the BDSM side.

"This room is one of the L'artisanant four." James takes a seat on a single sofa with high backs that reach up to the ceiling while the sides curve around his body. I don't know what he's doing or playing at, but James didn't get his name for nothing. "This is run by four men, some say they're four of the most powerful men in America, and others say that they're mere thugs that simply had more brains than money who then created this multi-billion-dollar secret society that holds the world's most elite secrets."

"Sex? Hardly secretive," I whisper, flexing my fingers. I know that I shouldn't answer back, but something over the past couple of hours has given me confidence, even if it does only exist inside of my head.

He holds my stare, resting his ankle on his knee. "Not just that."

Finally, I yank the zipper up, covering my body. "Is there a reason why you wanted me in here? To come with you?" I ask, and the way his mouth twitches is enough to confirm it.

"Maybe." He stands to his feet, dusting off his immaculate suit pants and putting his hand out to me. "I will take you back to your dorm."

I falter in my step. College. My classes. Everything that I should be doing instead of being fucked seven ways to Sunday at some high-end sex club.

I take his hand as he leads me out, pushing open the doors. This time when we move through the main room, the energy is dying out, some asleep in various areas of the room. I must have been in the room for a couple hours, at least. Turning my head over my shoulder, the words *Niveau un* are written in the same cursive font as L'artisanant, only illuminated in a gentle shade of blue.

Level one? That's what level damn one entails? To be fair, I enjoyed it, and I desperately try to squash the question

from spilling from my lips. “How often do they hold these... events?” It comes out anyway.

James leads us back out the front door until we’re on the wooden porch as he hands a valet our ticket. “Once a month.”

“And why do they do it?” I find myself asking, but not really wanting the answer.

He doesn’t answer anyway, and when the Maserati is back in front of me, I slide into the passenger seat with an eerie feeling that someone, or someones were watching me as I did so. We don’t remove our masks until we’re down the road.

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Royce

I've only ever felt true fear once in my life. Jade was around five, and she fell off her bike while I tried teaching her. She tipped, fell, and skinned her knees, leaving blood smears all over our parents' pristine white marble driveway. I remember feeling so helpless that my stomach ached with anger. I was angry at myself, but I was also angry at my dad. He bought her that bike, and in essence, he wasn't to blame for it, but at that time, all of my wrath was aimed at him. I was irrational. I flew off the handle big fucking time and swung at him, jacked him straight in the jaw. I wish I could say that I'd want to go back to that same boy. To Royce Kane. The possessive older foster brother who jacked off to the thought of his underage sister behind his closed doors, but I can't. Never. Time hasn't just aged us. It tore us apart too.

There's a knock on my front door and I pick up my gun from the coffee table, shoving it into the back of my jeans.

"You gonna be this on edge for the rest of the week, or...?" Gypsy teases, nudging his head up at me from the sofa. "Fucking gangster."

"You gonna go stay at your house this week, or...?" I snap back at him with a snarl, opening my front door wide before bringing my eyes to the person standing on the other side.

"Son," Dad murmurs, popping the collar of his Armani suit.

I step aside, waving him into my house. The first fucking thing I bought when I left home. Situated right near the ocean, with a dock, floor to ceiling windows shaped in a diamond in the sitting room, and all log-style furnishings. I never wanted to be in the center of LA, in fact, I fucking hate LA. Near the ocean is where I need to be, and this way I get my boat, I get nature, and I get peace and fucking quiet when I don't have Gypsy or Wicked hanging off my fucking arm. Wicked is harder to get rid of since he lives with me.

Kicking the door closed as he enters, I bypass the granite counter and varnished bar stools, taking the two steps down into the lounge. Mountains spill out the sides, small islands jacked all over the ocean in the distance. "Everything all good?"

Dad takes a seat on one of the chairs, resting his arms on his legs. "Yes, well." He pops off the button to his suit jacket and leans back. "We may have a slight problem."

"Nope," I say, pointing a finger at him with one hand while reaching for my cigarettes with the other. I fall down onto the single black leather chair, blazing the end of my cancer stick. "The deal was that there would be no fucking issues."

Dad looks at me with tired eyes. Wrinkles line around the edges as a dark five o'clock shadow scatters over his jawline. "I know, son, but we've hit a brick wall with one of the dealers."

I sink back, blowing out a cloud of smoke. Gypsy is always quiet when my dad visits. He doesn't like him. Not sure why. Actually, none of my brothers like him, and that

should be a red flag, but I always bring it down to the fact that Dad isn't for everyone. He's a cunt, and a dry one at that.

"One of my main sellers is having trouble moving shipments over the border."

I shrug. "Well, fuck, Gypsy here is quite comfortable using his pretty little fucking face to trick his way through border control."

Dad shuffles uncomfortably, giving me a tense, brief smile. "I get that, but just give me two days. I'll have it." I grind my teeth, slightly agitated. This isn't the first job he has delivered for us, in fact— "Son, you know I've got this. I'm a powerful man. The shipment will be here two days from now, ready for you all. We've been doing this for what, four years now, and I haven't let you down once."

I grunt, stubbing out my cigarette in the gold plated ashtray that was once a cap from my bike wheel. "Two days, Pops."

He smiles, leaning back. "Done."

I watch his eyes and how they shift around the room nervously, I don't know if he has always been like that or if this is new, and I sneak a look at Gypsy quickly to find him already watching me. His face is frozen, expressionless.

I clear my throat. "You and Mom?" I test the waters that I want to fucking dive into. "You good?"

He shakes his head, laughing. "Ask me what you really want to know."

I have two options right now. I can pretend that I don't assume he has a little girlfriend, or I can show him the hand I'm holding—with the knowledge that I have a whole new fucking deck hiding under my ass. "You're around that age to find someone half your age is all..." My fingers flex.

He chuckles. I can almost feel Gypsy's eyes boring into mine. He doesn't know shit about what I'm talking about, he just assumes that I'm catching on to who my old man really is. "I may have..." Dad says the words I already know.

"That poor little bitch. She hot?" I joke, kicking my leg out in front of me. "Let her know that when she's over riding on daddy's washed-up cock, she can come drop to her knees for her master."

Dad visibly stills, and it's the most emotion I have seen in him since—forever. He is an emotionless man in general, hardly shifting energy to accommodate anyone. He releases his tension with an easy smile on his lips. "Mmmhmm, sure." Standing up, he swipes his lips with his thumb. "See you in two days." Just as he reaches the door, his fingers flex around the handle as he looks at me over his shoulder. "Oh, and boy? Wanna keep an eye on your sister?"

"I had every plan to do that, but not for the reasons that you, as her dad, are probably hoping for."

He turns this time, facing me while leaning against the doorframe. "Elaborate."

"Well," I say, pushing up from my chair. "You're hoping I keep her safe, you know, away from all the bad little boys in college. Which, given that's definitely something I would have done in the past, but now I don't give a fuck." I smirk, hitting the steps and going straight for the fridge. "I'll watch her, though. Only now I'll be watching her with my hand around my cock." I throw him a wink, wrapping my hands around my cold beer and slamming my stainless-steel fridge closed.

Dad shakes his head. "You really going to go with the whole incest thing? I mean, I always knew you had a thing for her, but this?"

I swallow my cold beer while swiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "Chill, old man. I'm not about to dip my finger into the honey pot." Ignoring him, I'm hoping he disappears so I can get back to business with Gypsy.

The door closes behind me just as Gypsy opens his mouth. "Hate that fucker."

Chuckling, I sit back in my chair and shake my head. "You're paranoid." My phone dings in my pocket and I reach

inside, unlocking a new message.

Nellie: She's annoying. Why do I have to watch her constantly?

Because I fucking said so.

I toss my phone onto the coffee table. “There’s something up with Dad and his shipments.”

Gypsy whistles as I scoop up my keys for my bike. “Damn, might want to also check this out, brother.” I look down at his phone that he’s passing me before going back to him.

“What?” I snatch it off him and look down at the phone. It’s a girl, naked and bound, back facing the camera. Her long brown hair trails down her back, stopping above her tailbone in soft waves. Sexiest fucking body I have ever seen, with curves that made my fingers itch, reaching to touch, and a soft ass that dips where it’s supposed to.

I push play when I realize it’s a video.

The man recording walks out from behind the phone, wearing a dark suit, gloves, and a ski mask. My breathing halts when I see the K Diamond emblem glistening on his chain.

Everyone knows who the fuck K Diamond is. He’s notoriously known in the human trafficking sector of underground scum. The name itself came from his symbol. It’s a K and then another K mirrored, creating a diamond where each tip of the letter begins and ends.

“That’s your phone, man,” Gypsy whispers, pointing down at it.

I clench my jaw. *What the fuck does he want.* We all know how he works. He chooses his tormentors who he knows can afford it, and taunts them with something, or someone, that he knows we will want or need, offering them at a price. If we ignore it, he kills that person—which to be honest, I don’t know who this bitch is in the video, so I couldn’t give a fuck—but then he puts a hit out on your mom, grandmother, fucking sister, aunt. Any other female

that you are close to. It's how he chooses his victims. No one knows why he does what he does, or even how. He hides his identity behind a ski mask and cameras. If you purchase your bait that he sends you, they come with the K Diamond brand burned into their flesh as a reminder. He's a serial killer, rapist, and fucking all-around gross motherfucker.

His body moves in front of the girl, as she twists and turns her wrists together in the rope binds. A red tie is tied to the back of her head, but other than that, her skin is clean.

She doesn't seem as dirty as the other girls I have seen through his videos. Her skin is tanned gold, and for once, I'm annoyed that I can't see the victim's face. There's a reason why this man has chosen me, but there's never been a case where he specifically chose a girl for his victim.

Kneeling in front of her, I watch as his ski mask comes into full view over her frail shoulder. "This one is different." The voice that comes through is over a recorder. "Are you ready to gamble on a diamond?" Before I can answer, or take in anything that's in the video for a clue, the video cuts out and I'm looking back at a blank screen.

"How have you managed to fall on his radar?" Gypsy asks, puffing on his joint like his life depends on it.

My fingers are flying over my phone in a rush and when I put it to my ear, Storm's voice cuts through. "It's Tuesday, you know I'm busy on Tuesdays. What is it?"

"I need your smart-ass brain."

I hang up and we move outside of my house, swinging my leg over my bike while shoving on my helmet.

"You going to buy that chick? Play into The Riddler's game?"

I scoff. "Fuck no. When he sends me her body parts, I'll preserve them in my freezer."

Pulling into the clubhouse, I kick out the stand to my bike just as Lion strolls out with a cigar hanging out of his smirking mouth.

“What’s so funny, fucker?”

He removes the cigar, shaking his head. “How’d it go with your visitor?”

My mouth slams closed, just as Bonnie, Lion’s wife, strolls out of the clubhouse. The clubhouse is an old house that was built in the 1950s by one of the original Wolf Pack MC members. The house has been in Lion’s family for generations and generations. The industrial buildings that surround it were built around this house. Four small pillars stand at the front, and a porch that has been stomped on by bloody biker boots way too many times. Aside from that, the chipped paint from the bullet holes and tinted windows hide all the nasty shit that happens inside. Six bedrooms, two lounges, dining room, and an extension of a sunroom off the back porch. It’s everything that older folks loved. Back in the day, it would have been worth a fucking shit ton. Sitting on a couple of acres, the whole property is fenced by metal padding. There’s a garage filled with a bar, pool tables, and cum-filled sofas to one side, and a fighting ring on the other. Typical type shit. At the back of the property, hidden behind the house is a small playground, and behind that, is where we bury past brothers. Headstone after headstone stretches out to the back of the fence line. Kids fucking love it when they’re here, say the place is haunted. Which it is. The MC live and breathes each other, that shit doesn’t stop the day we die. It continues through the soil we party on.

“Not fucking good.” I roll up the sleeves to my shirt, curling them around my elbows.

“Wanna call church?”

I nod my head. “Yeah.”

“What’s this I hear about a pretty girl here a few nights ago on your account?” Bonnie teases, hands on her wide hips. Bonnie is around the same age as Lion, sitting in their

mid-fifties. She has long blonde hair, brown, beady eyes, and a whole lot of don't-fuck-with-me going on.

"She's my sister, first of all."

Bonnie's smile only stretches even farther. "Well, I'd be careful if you're bringing her around, you know that if you don't own it, one of these fuckers will."

I flip her off as we make our way into the house.

Once I'm inside, I follow Lion into the main boardroom of the house, also known as the lounge room, where we hold what we call church. Cliché as fuck, but since there isn't a hell room equivalent to church, we continue to use it.

I take a seat at Lion's right side as the rest of the brothers pile in one at a time. My eyes find Wicked straight away, a slight grin playing on my mouth as my finger rubs my upper lip. His jaw is set, his eyes dead. Wicked is exactly as his name perceives him, fucking wicked. He's who I choose to bring with me if I need anything done, and likewise with him.

He takes the seat beside me as Gypsy sits opposite, on the other side of his old man aka Lion. The little shit is a complete fucking headcase, driving his old man nuts. He'll never be taken seriously in the club and will only ever be respected because of his lineage to Wolf Pack. Which makes him a brat. Justice goes beside Gypsy, our level-headed ex-lawyer who can negotiate his way out of any deal at the fucking drop of a hat. Beside Wicked is Roo, the Australian in the club and a thirty-three-year-old Thor looking motherfucker. I wanted his name to be Thor when he patched in, but he got Roo instead, because when he fought Gypsy in the ring, Lion said he kicked like a kangaroo. If you've ever seen one of those muscled machines kick, you'd know that's not a fucking compliment. He has long blond hair, blue as fuck eyes, and skin as golden as the Sydney Bondi sand he comes from. Pretty fucker can crush your skull with a flick of his wrist too, so I wouldn't fuck with him. Opposite Roo is Billie The Puppet, yeah, after the very

same psychopath from *Saw*. I mean, need I say more? Billie is fucked in the head, and I don't mean that lightly. He likes to play games with his victims, which means I very rarely take him with me on kills. He fucks around, likes to drag out death as long as he can before actually putting the poor fucker out of his misery. One time, in Sicily, we got in the middle of a mafia war between the Italians and the Russians. Was a fucking mess, but Billie here decided to send a message to the Bratva who had apparently personally insulted him by wearing the color pink. It was one man who wore pink, but Billie was offended. He took him, laid this poor little fucker beneath a hydraulic machine, and slowly crushed him. I'm putting it very fucking lightly. There were minutes there, before he sandwiched this poor cunt like a fucking crepe, that his flesh was popping out the sides, swollen and about to burst. Every time this little shit answered a question wrong, Billie would push the button. And I mean, he was asking stupid questions, like what's after B? The kid would say "C!" and Billie would laugh like a maniac, scratch the *Fuck the Police* tattoo over his neckline and say, "Ehhhh! Wrong!" then push the button again. We'd all be sitting there fucking dumbfounded, but we knew this was what he liked to play. I mean, his story is one fucked up enough for the books. He is also the exception of how you should judge someone by their past. Even if they don't live there no more, they still decided to live there once upon a time. He is that fucked in the head.

Opposite Billie is Fury. Fury is a Vet, African American man who, for real, you don't want no beef with. He is old-school and has no problem ending your life with his fist. Fury is also one of the smartest fuckers I've ever met. Ever. He's a single father to the most annoying brat in the world, but she's also the MC princess, so if anyone picks on her, I'll kill them.

Fluffy and Slim are our two prospects—for now—but they don't sit in church with us. We leave the prospects with

Billie. He has enough fun with them to last a fucking lifetime. Poor little fucks.

Lion's gavel drops and the pounding on the solid piece of wood silences everyone. "Sicko, what the fuck is going on with your old man?"

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Jade

School is beginning to feel more and more like a prison. It's worse here, because I don't have the safety of my mom to fall back on. I'm caged between reality and my nightmare, I can't move. I can't breathe. I'm alone, even though Sloane is always with me.

"Hey, you're okay?" Sloane asks, handing me a Solo cup. It's a Friday night and I usually have James on Saturdays, but I haven't heard from him since Tuesday. I'm thankful that I haven't seen him since then because it was weird.

We move through the sea of people as my head pounds with the music and my blood warms from the alcohol inside of me. I tip my drink down my throat. "I need to get out of here, Sloane," I yell into her ear when she pulls me onto the lounge dance floor.

"What do you mean?" she asks, wrapping her arm around my waist and falling into my back. "We just got here!"

I spin around to face her, my hands coming to her cheeks. "I mean out of college. I don't think I'm in the right frame of mind to complete it right now. I already know that I'm failing."

Sloane waves me off, grabbing my hand and moving me to the front of the house. “Nonsense!” She pulls through the front door until we’re out on the patio. “But I will support you if you were to take a break. I get it, J. You’ve been a little bit off lately. I will support whatever it is that you need to do.”

My shoulders relax slightly as emotion builds in my throat. I love Sloane. I truly believe that every girl needs a best friend, but not every girl needs a husband. A spouse’s love is conditional, whether you see it or not. When you first fell for your partner, it was for reasons. A best friend will love you forever.

“Thank—” The rumble of bikes coming down the street halt my words. I shake my head and internally roll my eyes. There’s no fucking way. “Thank you. I need another drink.”

“Another drink?” an unfamiliar voice murmurs behind me, and I shuffle to see who it belongs to. He flashes his pearly white teeth at me, a complete contrast to his black hair. “Name’s Jensen.”

I smile softly, trying not to cringe. I don’t know why college boys don’t do it for me, and very briefly, I thought this one could. But now, face-to-face, I know that’s another fail.

I take the drink from him. “Thanks.”

“Jade, right?” Jensen says, leaning against the railing. His eyes remain on mine, his feet crossing at his ankles.

I nod. “Yup,” taking a sip of the flat beer. Gross. Everything about college is severely overrated. Even somewhat tipsy, it does nothing to fill the void that’s aching in my chest.

“Is Ollie inside?” Sloane asks, winking at me. “I think I’ll go find him.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, warning bells are going off, but I silence them. I need to put myself in college. Mentally, I’m not there. I’m many years ahead of all the people at this school. I’m struggling.

Sloane's eyes fly over my shoulder as music continues to pour out of the house. She pales. "Oh shit. Jade..."

I turn my head slightly over my shoulder to find Royce tossing his helmet on the ground near his idling bike, his eyes furious and on Jensen. His jaw tenses, his fists closing. How the fuck did I miss the fact that their bikes had stopped? Everything spins, my brain fuzzy. Ah, that's probably why.

My brows curve in as he gains distance, but just as he's about to reach us, one of the other bikers steps in front of him, hand on his chest. This one has short hair on the sides, longer on the top. He doesn't seem to have a flick of tattoos, and almost looks too good to be in an MC vest, no offense to Royce. Wicked. Wicked leans into Royce's ear and whispers something that only they can hear before I watch as Royce's face morphs into serenity. Calm. All of the anger we all witnessed has vanished.

Royce's eyes cut to mine, a snarl on his mouth. He pushes away from Wicked and storms toward me, only this time, he does it while grabbing a cigarette, putting it between his swollen lips, and lighting the end gracefully.

God, Royce. So damn beautiful it aches my soul. When I was a teenager, I thought that ache was butterflies, but now, what I feel isn't butterflies in my belly. It's my soul exploding from beneath my skin and not having anywhere for the shrapnel to escape to. It's everything that should kill you but doesn't, instead it lingers within your veins, spreading poison. The bow in his middle lip, the symmetry of his face, the strength of his jaw, the beautifully cut cheekbones, sharpened by a scalpel. It's even the tattoos that stain his flawlessly muscled skin, and the way his dark eyelashes fan out over his cheeks. It's his annoyingly perfect nose and impeccably straight, white teeth. Royce Kane is not for one girl, he's for every girl. He's your mom's secret fantasy and your father's insecurity.

He's a big slut too.

"What are you doing here?" I say through gritted teeth, just as his eyes swing to Jensen. I steady myself by clutching on to the wooden rail. *Woooo.*

He winks at Jensen. "Actually, not for you. Where's Nellie?" I try not to let the way he dismisses my encounter with Jensen affect me. This is what I always wanted, to not have his attention, so why does it bother me so much anyway?

"She's in the house." I lean against the railing, which puts me right in front of Jensen. If I wriggled back just a little farther, my ass cheeks would hit his crotch. "What is Nellie to you anyway?"

"Ahhh," Jensen says, his hand coming to my hip. Instantly, Royce's eyes snap to where they flex.

The harsh lines around his eyes soften as he quickly composes himself. He takes a step forward, his messy military boot hitting the tip of my Givenchy. The heat pouring from his body is enough to ignite an angry inferno. Or maybe I'm drunk.

He leans down until the tip of his nose touches the side of my temple. Jensen's grip tenses around my sharp hipbone. "Mmmm," Royce growls softly, his warm breath touching the skin on my face. "Wouldn't you like to know, Duchess." At the simple drop of my nickname, my insides solidify.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Why does his voice suddenly sound familiar?

You're drunk.

I step backward, forgetting that Jensen is right there, so obviously, my ass hits the apex of his fucking thighs. "Nellie's in the house."

"Who is this?" Jensen whispers into my ear from behind. I have to give it to him, he has balls not cowering at the presence of Royce.

Any other man most definitely would.

My eyes lock with Royce's, the rim of plastic coming to my lips as the stench of stale beer swims up my nose. "Just my brother."

"Oh, shit, man!" Jensen chuckles, sliding me away. "I thought you were an ex-boyfriend or something, but figured you were a bit too old." He's literally twenty-two. Jensen is a fuckwit. The Royce I know would have already punched Jensen, but I guess he's not the same boy I knew.

He's more composed. More in control. He's a weapon that's been sharpened and only utilized to cause mass destruction. *I'm in trouble.*

Royce's eyes remain on mine, but his words are for Jensen. "If only."

He leaves and I finally exhale the breath that I've been holding. Jensen reaches for me again, but all I want to do is run. I can't breathe, being suffocated by this life isn't helping. I can feel my mind slipping into a dark hole and I don't think I'm going to have the courage to pull myself out of it this time. Everything around me slows as my pulse quickens. I take the few steps needed to get to the front grass. I can vaguely see bikes parked at the front, but I don't care about them. I want the safety of my dorm, to be held indoors, in my soft blankets and safe. Safe.

Before I can stop myself, I'm running. The wind is whipping through my hair, drying the tears that keep falling down my cheeks. My life is fucked. I'm ruined. I wish I could go back to all those years ago and stop him from leaving. I wish he cared enough to not have left me in the first place. Pain tightens its steel fist around the organs of my heart and squeezes.

"Jade!" I hear someone yell out behind me, but it's too late, I need out. I need to be away from everything and everyone. I need silence and a cliff with the bluest water beneath. I want to watch the moody waves crash against dark rocks so my soul knows it's not alone.

An arm wraps around my waist and I'm being lifted off the ground. I kick backward, annoyed with the tears. The pain. The weakness. "Let me go!"

"Jade!" he yells again, only this time his voice sounds too familiar. Like bile rising up my throat, his name rings in my head. *James*.

I freeze in his arms, dropping to my knees. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you."

I don't want to be punished. I'm tired. I thought he was Royce. He sounded like Royce. My head is bowed as dark boots come into view. I can faintly hear another bike, but I dismiss it.

Those are boots, not loafers. Before I can stand, Royce is meeting me face-to-face, his eyes searching mine. "What are you doing, Duchess?"

I gulp past the rock that's in my throat. *He can never know.* "I—" Searching his eyes, the blue depth of them is enough to remind me of the waves I so desperately yearned for just moments ago, his pupils the color of the rocks that they would crash against. "Why didn't you take me?"

Royce pales, all blood draining from his cheeks. "What?"

Don't repeat yourself. You're going to regret it. He doesn't care about you anymore; he has made that much clear. "Why did you leave me there?"

After a beat of silence, he snorts. "You being there was better for you than you being with me. Trust me." He stands, pulling me up with him. Before I can protest, he's directing us back toward the party, signaling to whoever it was that followed him on his bike.

"But that's just it," I murmur, while refusing to pull out of his grip. It feels too good. Like the empty part of my soul has recognized the piece it has been missing for four years. "I don't trust you anymore."

"Listen," Royce says just as we reach the edge of the driveway. He turns around, his hand on my throat, and backs me up against a brick wall. Pressing a leg between

mine to pin me there, he tilts his head and studies me. “One, I don’t give a flying fuck about your trust. All I want is to have you stay the fuck out of trouble and keep your head down. Two? Stop making this about something other than what it is. You are my sister, one I didn’t fucking ask for, but I protect anyway. I don’t give a fuck who you fuck in your free time, where you stay, or...” He pauses, licks his bottom lip and then catches it with his teeth. His grip around my throat tightens. “Or how fucking good my hand looks around your throat. Now swing those fucking legs over my bike.”

He pushes me back and my hand comes to where his was, massaging it softly. I can feel the pieces of myself slowly fading away. James took all that I had and replaced it with hurt and pain, and the one person I leaned on for most of my life hates me now.

“I can find my own ride.” I shove past him and make my way down the driveway. The bikes are rumbling in the background while the men on them all watch us with careful but eager eyes. As if they’re fascinated by what they see. The party is mostly inside and out the back, but there are a few people on the patio, including Nellie, Ollie, and Sloane. No Jensen in sight. Thank god.

“Duchess!” Royce snaps, and it roots my feet to the ground. “On my bike. Right the fuck now.” The air shifts around me and anger slowly boils to the surface. I don’t want to make a scene. I never like making one, but he’s pissed me off more times than I can count tonight and yeah, my emotions may have been bruised a few minutes ago, enough to not answer him back, but now I’m angry.

I spin around and take the four steps to where he towers over me. I swing my arm back, fist my hand tightly, and punch him right in the jaw. He barely moves, but whatever.

“Fuck you, Royce!” I scream into his face on my tippy toes—and I still don’t reach his neck—“Fuck you for leaving me and then coming back and thinking you can tell me what to do like I’m some little puppy that you keep on a leash.

You!" I point my finger into his face, which is the exact moment I realize I fucked up.

He snatches my finger in the palm of his hand while his other flies to my throat again and I'm falling backward, my head smacking against the grass. I see double for a few seconds while Royce has a firm grip on me everywhere. "Still a fucking brat, huh?" He leans down until the tip of his nose touches my earlobe and only I can hear what he says. "I'm going to say this one time, Dutch. You're legal now. I'd watch that fucking tone." Pushing off me, he stands to his feet, glaring down at me. "The only thing you're riding tonight that isn't me, is my bike. Now get the fuck on, and maybe, just maybe, I'll take you back to your dorm tomorrow." It's as though he whacked the alcohol out of me. Defeat latches its ugly grip around my bones, as my eyes stay locked on the sky.

"I'm not staying at your clubhouse, Roy."

"Bike, Jade. Now."

Pushing up from the grass while grumpily pulling twigs from my hair, I scowl at him, ignoring the chuckles around me. "I hate you."

"More than I can say about you. I'll be back in a second." He looks over my shoulder. "She moves, tie her to my bike." My arms latch around my body as I dutifully make my way to the matte black Harley Davidson that's parked to the side. Turning to look over my shoulder, my eyes land on the same guy again, Wicked. Unintentionally, I seek him out anytime he's near. My stomach drops out my ass when I find him already studying me carefully. Nellie said that he doesn't speak, I wonder what that means and why. I can't help but want to know more about him.

"You know," the younger one says, I think his name is Gypsy. He grins around his floppy brown hair. His eyes are gentle, his features too pretty. "Don't get me wrong, seeing Sicko get all worked up over a girl for once is pretty fucking

entertaining, but, I gotta say—" He whistles, shaking his head.

"Don't say it," one of the other men mutters. He's darker in skin color, with a shaved head and hazel eyes.

Gypsy carries on. "You're one hot piece of fucking ass, and if he ain't hitting it, I'm gonna."

"You're a dumb motherfucker." That same man shakes his head, squeezing his eyes.

After talking with Nellie and Sloane, Royce is back in front of me, shoving his helmet over my head. "On the bike, don't let your legs touch the pipes, and put your arms around me." I do as I'm told after he's on. Starting it up, the vibration of the angry engine rumbles against my intimate area and I quickly squeeze my legs closed, which only means they tighten around Royce.

He turns over his shoulder, enough for me to see a smirk on the corner of his mouth and one dimple pop.

Revving the engine, I wrap my arms around his torso as he guides us out of the driveway.

It's about a thirty-minute drive out before he's pulling into the clubhouse, the gates sliding open and people spilling out of the front doors. It's a Friday night, and it's rather early, so the number of people who are partying is not surprising at all, although it shatters my hopes to sink into warm sheets and let sleep take hold.

The bikes cut out and everyone climbs off. I follow, my legs turning to jelly as soon as they're back on the ground.

I take off the helmet. "Can I just go to bed?"

Royce ignores me, turning his back to head into the main house. There's a fight happening in the corner where an octagon ring is set up, with drunk men laughing and cheering, and loud rock music spilling out of the house and to the front. I feel like a thousand eyes are on me, and I don't want any of them.

I know this is his area, and I don't want to be annoying to him by following him everywhere. I also don't want him to

feel like he has to look after me, so once he has disappeared into the house, I look around carefully at all the people here. A mixture of old and young, some middle age. More men than woman, some big and some skinny, some muscled, some average.

"You're wondering why he left you here unarmed," a voice murmurs from behind me and my eyes drift close to catch my breath. That is a really nice voice. Soft and smooth like velvet. It wraps around your body like silk.

Turning around to face the owner, I'm surprised when I see Wicked leaning against his clean white Harley, his arms crossed and legs the same. "Somewhat."

Wicked doesn't flinch, his eyes staying on mine. It's unnerving how he can do that. Say a lot by saying nothing at all. "Royce doesn't let anyone ride bitch on his bike. You came in like that." Wicked stretches his legs wide into a spread and my mouth waters. "No one will so much as breathe near you now. He knows he doesn't have to worry."

"And you?" I find myself saying, and then I want to punch myself for saying it out loud. "Will you?" I've always been one that would prefer to dance with danger than walk with the mundane.

Wicked cocks his head an inch, taking me in. "Guess that will be up to Royce." He pushes off his bike and walks past me. Before he makes it any farther away, I call out to him.

"Wicked?" I say, studying his broad shoulders and patch. "You called him Royce, not Sicko?"

His shoulders tense before he relaxes and carries on to the house. I still don't know what I'm doing standing here, but that conversation with Wicked was strange. Every other person here calls Royce Sicko. Except Wicked. Weird. Or maybe not. I make my way toward the side of the house, finding a little path that leads to the back.

"Hey!" someone says from the dark corner of a small garden shed, skipping toward me while shoving what was probably a joint into her back pocket. "Are you Sicko's

sister?" she's cute. With shoulder-length brown hair and a skinny little frame. She's wearing tight blue skinny jeans and a Harley Davidson loose tee.

"Ah, yes?"

She screams, her skinny arms flying around my neck and pulling me into her chest. "I'm Everly, but people call me Silver, after my mom. I'm Fury's daughter!"

I don't know who Fury is, but I nod, hugging her back awkwardly. "Cool!"

She steps back. "Oh my god. I've always wanted a big sister. This is awesome to have someone else around my age, since all the women here are old as fuuuccckk!"

"Hey! You little fucking shit!" someone else calls out, rounding the back of the house with one hand on her hip. "One day, I'ma whip your ass."

"Bitch, please. You love me and you know it." Silver gestures to me. "It's Sicko's sister! Look how pretty she is!"

The older woman rolls her eyes, coming closer to me. "Ignore Silver. She's so used to being a brat that she forgets she's seventeen."

Silver flips her off. "Lion is clearly not hitting you right, or are you going through menopause?"

The woman ignores her, keeping her eyes on mine. Her skin is beautiful for her age, but her eyes tell a story of how much they've seen. "I'm Bonnie, Lion's wife."

"Hi," I say, crossing my arms in front of myself. Lion is scary. I can't imagine this woman putting up with him.

Silver hooks her arm in mine. "Oh this is awesome. Bea is going to be so pissed when she sees you. I mean, I get that you're his sister, but it's foster, and you're insanely hot! Bea is going to hate you." I don't know who she's talking about and I'm not sure I want to know. I just want a bed and food. Food will be good. Where the fuck is Royce?

We climb the stairs that lead to the back porch and sunroom. Yelawolf "Psychopath Killer" is thudding through the house as I turn to shut the door behind me. Spinning

back around, I freeze when I see Royce, Wicked, Lion, and Gypsy. They're all seated around a small table with drinks in their hands, with Royce looking tense. A blonde girl is on his lap, a joint between his fingers. There are a couple of girls in here actually, all dressed different to Silver and Bonnie. More exposed.

"Oh, this is going to be great," Silver whispers, leaning into me. "Just saying, after you throw the first punch, I'm going in." I want to squeeze her and say I'm not fighting anyone.

The blonde flicks her fake long hair over her shoulder, her brown eyes coming to mine. "Aw, is this your sister?" Her smile seems sincere, and for a split second, I wonder what Silver was talking about. Until Silver opens her mouth.

Silver grins at—who I'm guessing is Bea. "Foster."

I watch as her smile switches to a scowl and she looks at me with newfound competition.

Bonnie flicks her fingers at the three of them. "Get out of here. Go rub on someone out there."

Bea runs her finger down Royce's face. "Aw, I can stay, right, baby?"

Royce's eyes are on mine, his jaw as tight as my fist. He hates the word baby. I've always known that, so I can't help the smirk that creeps on my mouth. This girl is nothing but a dick warmer, or she would know that Royce hates that word.

His eyes narrow when he catches my smirk. Licking his lips, he bares his teeth at her and chews on her neck. "B is right, babe. Go ahead, I'll grab you when I'm going to bed." I fight the obvious distaste that that leaves in my mouth as Bonnie takes my hand and gestures to the empty seat beside Wicked, leaving Royce's smug, scowl-ridden face right opposite mine.

Bastard.

"Now, are you a vodka, gin, or rum girl?" Bonnie asks, moving around glasses in the cupboard.

Royce smirks at me. "She's a water girl."

I raise my brows at him in challenge, feeling the heat of Wicked beside me. *Why do I feel him so deeply?* “Actually, I’m more a whiskey girl now.” I smile up at Bonnie. “Royce forgets that he doesn’t know me anymore.”

Lion chuckles from the other side of the table. “Girl’s gonna drive you mad, son.”

As Bonnie sets the glass in front of me, I take in the room we’re in. Looks like a second kitchen area, more private than the rest of the house. The paint is old, furnishings look to be a hundred years old, but the photos hanging in frames all over the walls catch my attention more than anything else.

I take a sip of my whiskey, relishing in the burn it ignites over my lips. A photo catches my eye behind Royce as I run my tongue over my lips to suck the residue. “It’s good, thank you, Bonnie.” The photo is of a man holding a baby, a bandana tied around the front of his head. Standing in front of his bike. He looks like a proud dad. Something every child wishes they had, which is probably why it caught my attention. Something I wish I had.

“Are you boys going to sit in here all night or are you gonna go tend to your guests?” Bonnie says as Silver takes a seat on the other side of me. I can feel the heat of both Wicked and Royce’s stare on me. They’re both different, but one. A gang on their own. It’s weird to witness, because the last time I saw Royce, the only people I could see him having that kind of bond with was Orson and Storm.

Wicked leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I turn to face him, his stone eyes on mine before moving to Royce.

Royce stands from the table. “I’ll be back in the morning. Jade, come on.”

“You’re not having her sleep here are you?” Silver says. “I mean, I’ll take her to my house if that’s what you’re planning. Those beds are nasty.” Her pretty face scrunches up as she says the words.

Royce ignores her. "Come on."

"Wait!" Silver stops me with a hand on mine. "What's your number?"

"Fucking hell," Royce grunts. "Really?"

Bonnie chuckles. "And me too. I want it."

"I'm not even surprised," the darker man says, who looks a lot like Silver. "Really, you're fucking lucky Swifty isn't here either, or she'd be grabbing her number too."

Royce rolls his eyes. "Hurry up."

Silver ignores his moody behavior as I blabber off my cell number to them both. "Thank you for the whiskey, Bonnie." Bonnie smiles at me, taking a seat on Lion's lap. Lion seems to still be studying me, his head tilted to the side. My eyes flick back to the photograph that caught my eye when I first came in, before going back to him.

"Yes, that's me," he answers my unspoken question. He notices a lot without saying a lot. Interesting. Scary, a little, but interesting.

My mouth curves sadly. "Your kid is lucky." Shoving my phone into my back pocket, his next words halt me.

"How do you know that? I could be the worst thing that ever happened to that kid."

My fingers flex in my hands. "Impossible."

"How so?" he asks, flashing me a crooked grin.

"Because I know what that looks like, and you don't have his smile."

His face falls, but not in an offended way, more shocked. "Excuse me." I move away from my chair, turning to wave goodbye to Wicked. Royce is already exiting the room, but Wicked? Wicked is glaring at me like he's just seen a ghost. The room is empty, quiet aside from the music playing through the house. Something is moving inside his brain and I'm not sure I want to know what that is.

I smile at Wicked softly before running to catch up to Royce.

Once we move through the sea of people and hit the front door, I jog down the steps to reach for him. "Where are we going?" I for sure thought he was leaving me here so he could go fuck Bea.

He flinches away from me, staying quiet until we're far enough away from people and near his bike. "Taking you back to yours. Changed my mind."

I pause, crossing my arms. "Why the sudden change?" Now that it's just us with no spectators, it seems anything we both say to each other is real. Raw.

He stops, taking me in from head to toe. "What was that about? What you just said?" His expression turns hard, and even though it's dark out, the lights from the house offer enough to take in the outline of his face. "Jade."

Jade. Not Duchess.

"Nothing, just that I know what cruelty looks like and he didn't seem like that to me."

"You don't know a fucking thing about Lion." His lip curls around his teeth, but I get the feeling the snarl is toward me, not about his feelings of Lion. It's obvious how much Royce loves Lion. "I'm going to ask you once."

My blood turns cold as he takes a step closer. *Don't ask me anything, because I will have to lie.*

"Has someone hurt you?"

My mouth slams closed, my jaw locked tight. I stay focused on the small patch that's sewn into his leather that reads *Rip. Vice President.* Fingers wrap around my chin, his chest to mine as he brings my head up so my eyes come to his.

His eyebrows knit together. "Tell me, Jade."

I don't say a word, the syllables sticking to my throat and unwilling to come out.

His thumb swipes at the bottom rim of my lip. "If anyone has hurt you while I've been away." His mouth slams closed and the muscles on either side of his jaw pulse. "I'll fucking kill them, and that's not a threat. That's a goddamn

promise." My legs wobble beneath my weight, my restraint pulling against me. I want to tell him everything.

I open my mouth, but just as words are about to slip out, Bea interrupts. "You're not staying?" she whines, and I flinch away from Royce, stepping far enough away so they can talk. I find myself near Wicked's bike. *I can't believe I was going to tell him!*

Royce narrows his eyes at me as they fall to the bike I'm near, standing close like it's a lifeline. "Nah, you'll be fine for tonight." He hands me the helmet. I take the steps forward to take it, my fingers gliding over the glossy white paint of Wicked's Harley.

"But—"

Royce glares at her. "Leave, Bea."

Bea's eyes fly between Royce and me, and I see the images flash over her eyes without her even displaying them. We've gotten that all our life, people assuming there's something more to Royce and me than what there is.

"Fine. Call me?"

"Never," he says bluntly, and then turns back to me and points to his bike. "Get on." Sighing, I swing my leg over the back and press myself against his back. His bike is loud enough to make you fucking deaf. He rides us out of the gates as they split open, before gunning it down the street and onto the highway. The air whips through the loose strands of my hair, an easy smile on my face. I will never admit it to Royce, but I love riding on the back of his bike.

Thirty minutes later, we're pulling up to campus, the bike echoing through the empty streets as he comes up to the dorms. He cuts the bike off and pauses as I swing my leg off while removing his helmet. I squeeze the cord in my hand, ready to hand it back to him and leave. The air is quiet, with just him and I standing so close. So intimate.

"I couldn't bring you with me." His voice is low, soft. As if he didn't want to say the words, but knew he needed to give me something. "There's a fucking lot that you don't know,

Duchess. I couldn't have you around me. I couldn't take you. I knew you'd be safe at home."

My heart snaps in my chest. "Oh how uncanny," I whisper, fighting the tears that are battling to burst down my cheeks. If I cry, I know it will be all over and he'll fight me until I tell him what I'm hiding. "You're not the only one with secrets, Royce."

He tilts his head, the veins in his neck swelling to the surface. "What's that supposed to mean, Jade?" I don't miss the bite in his tone. "See, when you say shit like that, it makes me want to kill people. Do you understand my problem here?"

"You're too pretty for jail?" I joke sadly, smirking.

"No." His eyes fall to my lips when my tongue slides over them. "I never get caught."

I hand him the helmet, and my heart explodes when his hand comes to mine. He could have grabbed it anywhere else, but he chose the exact area where my hand was to take it. My teeth sink into the inside of my cheek, tasting blood. I need to distract myself from doing something like expose the affect Royce has on me. "Night, Roy."

I pull my hand away from his first, sliding out beneath it while catching one of his heavy rings.

His eyes stay on mine. "Night, Duchess."

I quickly make my way up to the dorms, fighting the urge to turn back around and do something stupid like ask him to take me anywhere but here, but I have to remember that he's not the same boy. At times, I see the old Royce, but then I remember where we are now, how our lives are so different, how even when we were kids, he never looked at me like anything other than a fucking nuisance.

Once I'm safe and back in my dorm, I hear his bike start and pull away. I go to sleep that night wishing life was different.



Jade

I wake the next morning with memories of last night flashing inside of my head and my phone ringing on the ground. I blindly reach for it, quickly swiping it to answer.

“Hello?”

“Oh, thank god! You’re alive!” Sloane yells on the other end. “Tell me everything.”

I groan, covering my closed eyes with the palm of my hand. “I don’t know. We went back to the clubhouse and he brought me home. What happened to you last night?”

Sloane exhales. “Ollie and I had a fight.”

“You don’t say...” I roll my eyes, reaching for the curtain and ripping it open. The only way I’m going to get out of bed this morning is if the sun beams through my windows. I’m shit out of luck because it’s goddamn raining. Sighing, I close the curtains again. “Why did you fight?” Even though I know why. They’re too alike.

“He just got really drunk and started going off on everyone, so I tried to stop him and well, in short, I shouldn’t have.”

Sighing, I massage my temples and swing my legs over my bed. “Are you okay?”

"Always. Hey, are you working tonight?"

"It's Saturday, you know I always do." For years now, Sloane has been under the impression that I work from home for my parents. She's bought it. I made up a whole bunch of shit saying that I work for the company, trading numbers for work experience. I wish that was what I really was doing.

She sighs through the phone. "Well promise me lunch tomorrow so we can talk properly."

"Come back to bed!" I hear Ollie in the background.

"Sloane!" I scold her.

"Gotta go, bye!"

I laugh, shaking my head. She's useless.

5 Unread text messages

I open my messages and go to the most recent one.

Royce: That conversation last night isn't over.

I close his message and go to the next one.

Unknown: It's Silver! This is my number. PS Bea was super pissed when you and Sicko left.

Unknown: Save my number, sweetie. It's Bonnie.

Sloane: You and Royce have the longest sex buildup in history. I feel like when you both finally fuck, he's going to accidentally kill you.

My eyes roll to the back of my head. Sloane has always shipped me and Royce. She's crazy. Flicking open the final message, it's another unknown number.

Unknown: Yeah, I would.

I pause, my fingers flexing over the keypad on my screen. Ignoring the other messages, out of impulse, I reply **who's this?** Before working back through the previous messages. Flipping off Sloane with an emoji, saying thank you to Bonnie, sending laughing faces to Silver, and then finally I'm here on Royce's message. My heart pounds in my chest.

Don't.

Tossing my phone on my bed, I move through my room, gathering everything I need for a shower. Since I'll most likely be dressed in something uncomfortable tonight, I take out some gray yoga pants, and a loose Thrasher t-shirt, it's casual enough to lounge in. After my shower, I reach for my phone again and see three new texts.

I open Royce's first, since he scares me most.

Royce: Be there in three minutes.

"Fuck." I make my bed quickly while plaiting my hair in a French braid, allowing it to fall down my back. I finally go to open the next text message, but there's a loud bang on my door. Squeezing the handle, I swing it open to Royce and Wicked.

"Really, you shouldn't have," I say to Royce, batting my eyelashes.

He moves me out of the way as they both enter, kicking the door closed. "Mom get you this?" Royce gestures around the room. "She really went all out on you, didn't she?"

I squeeze my phone in my hand, my eyes flying to the photograph of me, Royce, Orson, and Storm out on the boat when we were kids. "Sure did. Guess that's what happens when one kid leaves the other behind."

Wicked takes a seat on the chair tucked under my desk, as quiet as ever. His silence isn't uncomfortable. It's easy. His presence, on the other hand, is intense.

Royce sits on my bed. "What are you doing tonight? Bonnie and Silver want you to come to hog-out."

I peer down at my phone, knowing that the unknown number must have replied, only when I read the text that's on my phone, my eyes fly to Wicked.

You're staring at him.

How did Wicked get my number and does Royce know?

"Ah, I can't. I have work. What's a hog-out?"

"Work?" Royce's face scrunches. "Since the fuck when do our parents let you work? It's a BBQ, Jade."

"She's lying," Wicked says, his eyes on mine.

"Am not," I snap at Wicked. "Every Saturday, I work for our parents. What?" I shuffle uncomfortably. It's not ideal having them both in my space, especially when I'm trying to contain the biggest secret I've ever held, and Wicked is too smart. Shit. Am I already showing my cards? I square my shoulders. "I run numbers for him and in return, they're giving me all of this."

Royce's eyes narrow as he swipes his hand over his lips. His hair is messy, his eyes dark. "Makes no sense, Duchess. You have a trust account. You don't need to work for all this."

Fuck.

I shrug, falling onto my soft mattress. "Doesn't have to make sense for it to be true."

"What time do you finish?" he asks, standing back to his feet. "I need to put one of the brothers on you."

"What?" I say, scowling up at him. "What do you mean you need to put one of them on me?"

Royce glares. "It means I need to make sure someone knows where you are at all times."

"Why!" I snap. "Royce, I just started a new college, you haven't been a part of my life in forever, and now suddenly you're all over me like a rash."

He laughs, but the chilling sound is like fire has being ignited down my spine. His legs hit my bed, his hands around my thighs, pulling me down while pinning my hands above my head with his.

"Royce," I urge, flashing to Wicked. "Really."

He turns to look over his shoulder to see Wicked. "Oh, what? him? You don't have to worry about Wicked."

I clench my teeth shut.

"I'm not all over you, Jade, I'm trying to make sure that you don't fucking die, and that's not because I give a fuck about your existence, that's because I don't want to turn Mom into an even worse alcoholic than what she is."

"Oh yeah?" I say, a flash of anger washing over me. "Then what was that speech about last night when you were all '*who hurt you, Jade*. Tell me, Jade. I would go to jai—'" His hand is at my throat, his fingers flexing to cut off my rant.

He leans down, his mouth on my ear. "Say the next words and see what fucking happens."

I lean up, my nose touching his, eyes crossed from his proximity. "You—" His tongue slides across my mouth and my insides solidify, either from shock or sheer emotion. Probably a combination of both.

Royce chuckles, pushing up from the bed. "Since I can't beat you and then fuck you—in that order—I'll just have to lick you every time you want to open that fucking mouth. Slim will be on your tail," he says, heading for the exit. "So don't do anything fucking stupid." When he opens the door, my eyes find Wicked.

For a second, it's just he and I. He stands, towering over my small frame. "You're lying. He knows it, but thinks he doesn't care right now, but Jade, when he finds out whatever it is that you're hiding, it's going to be catastrophic, so do me a favor."

I pause, peering up at him from under my lashes.

"Don't fucking tell him." Then he turns and heads for the door. Blowing out a breath of air, I fall back on my bed, confusion warping my vision. I wouldn't tell Royce anything anyway, but the problem with that is that Royce and I usually pick up on each other's feelings. We were linked from birth, and I fear that the more time we spend around one another, the quicker our souls are figuring that out.

I open the text to Wicked.

Me: Does he know you're texting me?

It's probably a stupid question, but I have to know. I can't read Wicked or the vibe that he sends out, but I also don't think he'd do anything to upset Royce either. I can't believe I'm going to say it, but I think they're even closer than

Royce is, or was, to Orson and Storm. Storm and I still keep in contact occasionally, but not so much Orson. He's all famous and rich, and living his best life in Hollywood Hills with India, but I know that if I turn up on his doorstep, or need anything, he's still the brother I grew to love. I wonder if Royce keeps in contact with them both, bet he does.

My phone sounds off in my hand and I open the text.

Wicked: No.

I read over the word again. And then again. Maybe I read him wrong, or maybe whatever it is that is going on between Wicked and I is completely platonic. I don't know what to write back, so I put my phone down and pull out my textbooks, flipping through the pages.

A few hours later, I stretch my arms above my head, catching the time. "Shit." My phone starts ringing on my bed. I hit answer.

"Jade," James says. "Be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Yes," I whisper. I got so lost in my studying that I lost track of time. Unacceptable. I usually need an hour to talk myself into what's about to happen. Since the last time James and I were together, things have shifted somewhat. He's turning harder. Angrier.

I quickly remove my clothes and slip into a tight black crop top with thin straps and long high waisted black pants, pairing them with my blood-red Valentino shoes and Gucci belt.

"Fuck!" I pick up my phone, finding J's name and hitting dial, hoping he picks up in time.

"Yes?"

"We have a problem."

"What is it?" James asks. I can hear the sound of cars in the background, so he must be on his way.

"Royce has put one of his friends on watch for me. I don't know why, but I think, well I'm assuming, that person will be

down in the parking lot. They can't see me going out, they'll ask questions."

"Yes they can, Jade. Tell them you have a business meeting with one of your out of town bosses. Which you do."

My palms sweat with nerves. "That should work."

"I'll see you in fifteen." He hangs up on me, and I look around my room nervously. I know that Royce will lose his shit if he thinks I lied to him, and on top of that, Wicked is smarter than he looks. What if he starts putting the breadcrumbs together and figures out what I've been hiding?

I open a text to Royce, hoping he's too drunk to read into anything.

Me: Just so you know, work tonight is an outing with one of my overseas bosses and her colleague.

I put my phone down and rush through my makeup, and then run a brush through my hair.

Royce: What? Where?

Me: Roy, I'm safe with them. Your boy can stay here until I get back.

There's a long pause, and I'm only just heading out of my dorm room when another text comes through.

Royce: I want you to get dropped off here after.

My fingers fly over my keypad furiously as I make my way down to the elevators. I hit the ground button.

Me: Where's here, and I don't know how late I'm going to be? And also, I don't want to go to the clubhouse dressed in what I'm wearing. I also don't know what kind of mood James is going to be in. He may not want to drop me there.

My heels click against the floor once I reach the bottom.

Royce: Clubhouse, and it's *nonnegotiable*.

Pushing through the doors, I make my way out to J's Maserati. Thank god for tinted windows.

A bike catches my eye parked in the corner, with an even younger guy than Gypsy on it, a hoodie over his head. He salutes me while firing up his bike.

I wave him off. Why the fuck is Royce being psycho—more than usual—right now?

Sliding onto the cool Italian leather seat, I shut the door behind myself. “Hi.”

James pulls out onto the road, filling the empty silence with awkward tension. Things between him and I have been up and down in the past, but no matter how low we got, there was a level of safety I found myself feeling while I was around him. He was always gentle while having sex. His placidity is what kept me from knowing he would never kill me, but at the hotel the other night, he felt frustrated. There’s a dark cloud of uncertainty that hovers over him now that makes me feel more unnerved than usual.

He continues to drive us out to one of the hotels on the other side of town. “We’re staying in tonight?” I ask, which is never a good thing. The food in my stomach rolls, unshed tears floating to the surface.

“Yes, Jade. Come on.” He unbuttons his jacket impatiently. I shut the door once I’m out and follow him into the lobby, hanging behind as he collects the key.

When we’re in the elevator, I desperately reach for something, anything, that may guarantee me walking out of here with my life. “I don’t have to go to the clubhouse tonight.”

He doesn’t answer, and for a second, I don’t think he’s going to, until the elevator reaches the top and he clears his throat. “Oh, yes you do.” Following him out into the hallway, the dark gray colored walls swirl in slow motion. He stops outside room #445 and slides the card down the slot until it beeps open.

He drops the card onto the counter beside the door, clutching his duffel bag in his hands. The room is furnished

typical of a five-star hotel. Clean linen, champagne glasses, gentle lighting.

"Go in the bathroom and wait until I tell you to come out. Remove your clothes and wear the gown that is laid out in there for you."

I nod. "Yes, sir."

Entering the bathroom through the main bedroom, I close the door and begin undressing when my phone falls from my pocket. "Shit." I forgot to put it with his keys, if he sees that I've made a mistake, my punishment will be even worse than whatever it is that awaits me.

After slipping into the same green silk gown he had me wear a few days ago and folding my clothes in a pile, I take a seat on the toilet and flip open the selfie camera. I'm somewhat active on social media, but I'm not a big selfie girl. Nothing wrong with girls who take selfies, I just can't bring myself to do them. I like taking shots of the ocean, of nature. Dead flowers interest me more than a pretty face. Raising my phone up to eye level, I snap a shot of me with my hair piled to one side, in waves from it being knotted in a braid all day. My makeup remains glossy and untouched, with impeccable lines and flawless tints. I look down at the photo and freeze. I look like that? I seem... sad. The silk gown hangs off one slender shoulder, my collarbones as sharp as Royce's cheekbones, my bright green eyes bloodshot around the edges. I slip my phone into my folded jeans and splash cold water over my face. "Okay. Here we go."

"You may come out," James says from one of the bedrooms through the door. Swinging it open, I follow his voice into the master bedroom. When I enter, he's blocked off the whole corner of the room in white sheets with a metal makeshift stand in the middle. It looks like it could be a photo shoot area, with the drop sheets and stand, but when I see the camera on the tripod and the tools lined up

beside him, I realize that this isn't James that I'm dealing with tonight.

This is something else.

He makes his way toward me, placing the bunny mask over my face before the blindfold. It's the same mask I use every time I work with him. I'm not sure why he chose it, or the significance of it. I bring it down to it having to do with his perverted mind. "I'm sorry, Bunny. I was happy having you beside me as my toy. As my greatest and most beautiful possession." He yanks the ties around the back of my head when I feel the tears seep through to the blindfold.

"Are you going to kill me?" I ask through cracked vocal cords, shredded like ribbons and falling from my lips.

"Shhhh," he says, his lips against mine. "Not yet, and not tonight, no." He pauses, as I hear rustling in the background. "Always the most beautiful girl in the room. Enough beauty and power to bring any man to his knees, and you could have had any, so why him?"

"Why who?" Snot runs down my nostrils as the tears become dense. When I go to swipe, his hands are on mine, leading me away. I feel the sheet between my toes, and I know where I am in the room. My hands are lifted up above my head, as cold metal claws clip around my wrists.

Disturbed "Inside the Fire" starts playing as he kicks my legs wide, fastening them with metal clamps too. He must push a button because they widen. I'm well acquainted with the spreader bar. There's a long pause of silence before he speaks, and this time when he does it's through that same voice recorder that he used when he made the last video.

"Every week you leave it, I will punish her."

What does he want?

"You're probably wondering what I want, as I usually only do sales with clients who I know are readily able to make an exchange."

Usually? What? He's never done this to me in my life. He must be talking to his camera.

"The answer is, I don't want anything. Isn't that just the mindfuck for you? You won't know how to save this girl, and when you've figured it all out, I can assure you, you will want to. For now, I will have no choice but to end her pretty little life." He pauses, and I feel the coolness of a pole over my ass. He doesn't hit me though. The cold pole glides down the crack of my ass, to the entrance of my pussy. I cry, a sob escaping as he pushes it up inside of me slowly. My walls tighten, resisting the foreign object.

Screaming so loud my throat rips my cries to shreds, my head falls back as pain radiates from between my thighs. "She was always the endgame." Necro "Who's Ya Daddy?" starts playing. He finally extracts the pole, slick droplets drip down my inner thigh.

"Mmmm, blood," I whimper, my pride and body plucked from its innocence and thrust straight through the gates of Hell. My pussy pulses, swollen from the abuse.

"Let's play a game of Russian ... roulette..." I shake my head, discreet wails pulsating from my chest.

My muscles release, my body finally relaxing. *Just fucking take me.* Heaven won't take me, and Hell won't welcome my demons back. I'll be left in purgatory again, only this time for real. *Fucking. Take. Me.* I'm tired. My body turns lucid, my mind fighting for clarity. Just when I think he's going to put a gun to my temple, I feel the tip enter me and the stabbing pain rocks me all over again. The song plays on repeat. *On and on.*

"There's one bullet in the chamber. We can do guess who." *Click.* He pulled the trigger. "Oh, didn't mean to do that." He cocks the gun again and I tense around the barrel, the emptiness of my heart spreading like an infectious disease, becoming hollower the further he goes on. "What will I want you to do?" *Click.* My shoulders start shaking as tears pour down my cheeks and through the blindfold.

"What's your name?" he says, and I pause, my face falling.

Shame falls over me, washing me with dirt as the song keeps playing, on and on and on and on.

"She doesn't want to answer, because she's smart."

He pulls out the gun, and everything falls silent as his footsteps move closer. "You're lucky she's needed tonight, or her punishment would have been much worse." He taps something. "But there's always next week."

Finally, he pulls off the blindfold from my eyes and unlatches my wrists and ankles.

"On the bed," he says, and I catch the area he has set up. It's almost like he's trying to conceal what he's doing.

"James?" I whisper, confused. He's dressed in all black, with a chain around his neck and the same emblem he burned into my ankle hanging off it.

"The bed. We're not done."

I move to the bed as he sets the camera up to the side of us. "Look to the left and don't look anywhere else. If you don't listen, I'll bring out the pole again. Understood?"

I nod, tears streaming down my face as I keep my eyes fixed on the wall. I let my mind wander. Who was here before us? A pamphlet is folded on the bedside table, with a newly married couple smiling back at me. *You've got to be fucking joking.* This room has probably seen love at its purest, being the honeymoon suite, and yet here we are. Painting the walls with evil.

He moves over me and shoves my face farther into the mattress as I feel the tip of his cock push on my entrance. The pain has gone past my threshold, to the point where my body is in survival mode. He enters me and I flinch, but I don't move. He pumps into me continuously, relentlessly. Groaning, but coaxing me softly. Patting my hair. Kissing me softly.

"I love making love to you, Bunny." Telling me that I'm the most beautiful girl in the world. He pumps inside of me,

thrusting as intimately as lovers. I swallow the vomit that raises up my throat. I will never like to fuck like this. He continues touching me gently. He continues until his groans spill into my ear from his hot breath and his sweat slicks over my flesh. When he climbs off me, I remain still until he tells me I can finally move.

“Remove your mask and go and have a shower. Make yourself presentable for your brother. Don’t want him knowing you’re fucking someone else that isn’t him.”

I ignore the pitiless words, dragging my tired, broken soul to the bathroom. I turn the shower on hot, without looking at myself in the mirror. Afraid of what I might see. Nothing should surprise me, considering the evil I have witnessed over the years, and I should be used to it, but it still impacts my spirit every time he takes me. Sexual abuse is not something that the human mind or body can be conditioned with. Survivors find coping mechanisms until they find a way to either escape or it kills you.

Slipping into the shower, I pour shampoos and soaps into my hair while finally allowing the tears to roll down my cheeks. I scrub all the dirt away with my hands, but don’t know what to do about the filth that stains my soul. Placing the bottles back onto the counter, I turn the faucet off and wrap a cotton towel around my limp body, wiping the condensation off the mirror and finally taking a look at my reflection. If I show up to the clubhouse like this, Royce will for sure know something is wrong, and if he misses it—which he won’t—I know that Wicked will for sure. My eyes are sunken in, dark circles lining my eyes. My lips are swollen from the stolen kisses, my cheeks red from the salty tears. I know why James did what he did tonight. He destroyed me from the inside. Why hurt someone physically when you can mutilate their soul from the inside.

Reaching for the makeup mirror on the counter, I flip it between my legs, studying where I’m swollen. *No bleeding.* Whatever I felt must have been whatever James used to

lube the pole with. The pain is still raw, though I'm aware it could be more psychological. I gather up my lace panties and slip them over my legs before sliding on my high waisted black pants. Securing my breasts back in the cups of my bra, I shuffle on the tiny lace crop top. My heart beats with fragility now, tender and sore. I need a drink. A strong drink. Searching through the cupboards, I find the hairdryer and a straightener and begin on my hair, while taking this time to mentally talk myself down from the cliff I've climbed. Memories. Memories help.

"What are you doing?" Royce asked, grinning at me from the other side of the room. It was Christmas day, and we knew how much I liked to keep the angel off the tree until Christmas day. My reasoning was that if the angel was up too early, that demons might steal her. So I waited until Christmas morning to put her up and took her down that night.

"I'm putting the angel up."

Royce was shirtless with gray sweats fastened around his lean waist, a bowl of granola in one hand and his other gripping a spoon, a smirk on his face. "I'll help." He put the bowl down on the coffee table and came closer to me. Since hitting my teen years, it was as though my body's reactions became heightened anytime he was near me.

I felt his skin up against my back as he reached from behind me, his long fingers wrapping around mine to take the angel. My heart short-circuited. "Let me do it." His mouth was close to the back of my head and my eyes closed. I was either being ridiculous or I'm being sensitive. I wasn't ready to explore other reasons as to why I was reacting to Royce.

I pull myself out of my memory. That was the last Christmas that Royce was with us, after that, we stopped celebrating while Mom mourned the 'death' of her only son.

I finish up my makeup with a loud exhale and pack everything away, shoving my phone into my back pocket and finally heading out of the bathroom.

The drive to the other side of town was longer than what I was expecting. I think that had more to do with the fact that the silence in the car was beyond awkward or sad. It was eerie. We pull up to the curb of the clubhouse. What do I say? ‘Thanks for ruining me just that much more, James. Just when I think you couldn’t get any worse, you go ahead and prove me wrong.’ I see Slim at the gate, through my side mirror. He takes a couple steps closer to the car and I panic. I need to get out.

James’ hand comes to my thigh and I have to fight with all of my impulses not to fly away from him. “Do I need to threaten you about the importance of our situation? You and I?” *You and me.* It’s what James has always said, in the hopes that over the years it will condition me to believe that we’re both doing this together. That’s what abusers do.

“No,” I whisper softly, my voice stern. Taking extra-long to get ready before coming was enough time for me to build up the wall I needed to hide my pain and hurt. The soul never exposes itself unless needed. “Never.”

He releases my leg. “I’ll contact you this week. We’re needed again at L’artisanant.”

My mouth snaps closed, a fizz of light sparking inside of my chest. “Okay.” I reach for the door handle, my legs restless to get me out of the car and away from James. Bile rises in my throat as I swallow it back down. “I’ll wait to hear from you.” Slipping out of the car, I shut the door and head for the gates as he pulls the car away, the bright taillights disappearing into the distance.

“You okay, Jade?” Slim asks, his eyebrows curved in worry.

I flash a smile, slipping between the opening gates. “I’m fine.” Music thumps in the distance and I wonder if all they

do is party, before remembering it's the weekend. Of course they're partying.

"You're late," Royce snaps in the darkness. I flinch, turning to face him. He's walking toward me, a drink in one hand and a cigarette between his fingers in the other. He's wearing a hoodie beneath his club vest, faded blue denim jeans that are torn at the knees, and his military boots. Warmth fills my heart at the sight of him, which makes no sense. I shouldn't be filled with anything but hate when it comes to Royce. Realization imprints the truth into my brain. *Our souls have recognized each other.* It's also no secret how hot Royce is, has always been. I'd be lying to myself if I had said I've never been attracted to him, it's just... I've never wanted to admit it.

"I didn't realize I was on a time schedule," I snide, rolling back my shoulders and heading toward him. "I need a drink."

"Do I need to be worried about your drinking?" he asks, flicking the ash off his cigarette and bringing it to his soft lips. *Thud, Thud. Thud.* Oh my god, I can't breathe. His eyes squint from the smoke floating near his pupils, and I lean forward, taking it from between his lips and putting it between mine.

"Fuck You" by Dr. Dre is playing loudly from the house, with people yelling between their sips of alcohol and tokes of weed. The majority of them are near the octagon. "No, you don't have to be worried about a thing." I walk past him to start my search for Bonnie or Silver to get me a drink, when his fingers catch mine and he jerks me backward.

I fall into his chest. *Thud. Thud.* His familiar scent like walking through the front door of my home. He swipes my hair from my face before his fingers flex around the back of my neck and he forces my face up to his. Nose to nose. My eyes plunge to his lips, my breathing stops. I squeeze the cigarette between my fingers to help with my self-control.

"What do you think you're doing walking up in here dressed like sex?"

Is that Niykee Heaton "OT" playing in the background? I almost laugh because I can imagine Silver changing the music to something sexual like Niykee Heaton. Makes me love her.

I glare at him, trying to anchor myself to the ground so I don't find myself lost in the maze that is the depth of his blue eyes. His lashes are as thick as sin, his eyes almost too pretty to be male. Royce is pure masculinity; he doesn't like being beautiful looking. "Because I can?"

His eyebrows raise a little, his top lip curling. I'm feeling reckless. This back and forth between him and I is becoming an addiction that my corpse-like soul needs. I'm addicted to the feeling of him being mad at me, pissed, close to me. I'm addicted to Royce Kane, and if you try to lock me in a rehab clinic, I'll only find my way back to him. You can't separate fate, no matter how hard you fuck it.

I run the tip of my nose over his, my eyes closing. "Don't like that, do you?"

His fingers clench around the back of my neck, pulling me in closer. His other hand falls down my lower back, landing on my ass cheek. *Oh fuck.* He grinds himself into my stomach and my body flushes searing heat. "I'm about to fuck you on this floor if you don't watch that mouth, Duchess, don't try to act like you don't know I've wanted into that pussy since we were kids."

When my eyes reopen—partially in shock at what he just said—he's smirking at me, his lips so close to mine.

"You were too late," I whisper roughly, unable to hide the sorrow in my voice. I glide my lips over his delicately. His body stills, his fingers tensing on my ass as his others behind my neck follow.

I push at his chest before I do something like kiss him, speed walking toward Silver, Bonnie, and a few other girls who are sitting at a picnic table near a fire pit in the front of

the house. Some men are scattered around the octagon as Gypsy, I think it is, is punching face with some other guy I haven't seen, while others are sitting around, piss drunk and singing along to Silver's choice of music.

"Well damn, girl," Silver says, an eyebrow arched at me. It's not until I sit beside her that I notice Nellie is on the other side.

I dismiss Nellie with a flick of my long hair. "I don't like you."

Bonnie starts laughing, as do the other women beside her.

Nellie glares at me. "I'm just doing what I was asked to do. Stop being a bitch."

I drop down onto one of the chairs, running my hands over my face. "I really need a drink."

Bonnie starts pouring slushy from a plastic jug and into a red cup. "Well, welcome to Karli's watermelon margaritas! She can't measure, so be careful, they're potent." I take the plastic cup from Bonnie, studying the women beside her.

"Hi, I'm Jade."

"I know who you are, baby girl." She smirks, flicking the ash off her smoke. "I think everyone here knows who you are now, and it has nothing to do with the sexy little getup you're dressed in and everything to do with the notoriously unattainable and stuck up prick Sicko, hovering over you like a starved wolf. I'm Karli."

I take a mouthful of the poison that was poured for me and swipe my lip with the cushion of my thumb. "Royce is just protective."

There's a long pause, so I take another gulp. Ice freezes my brain, but I ignore the throbbing pain, swallowing the rest of it and pouring another. After tonight, I want to forget everything that happened with James. I need a shot, not a drink filled with sugar and ice.

"Mmm, not the Sicko we know. That man doesn't give a fuck about anyone or anything, except for the club."

"Question!" Silver pipes up, her drink sloshing around and hitting her hand. The music has changed to "Chin Check" from NWA. "How many times did you guys fuck when you were younger? I feel like it was a *looooot*."

I burst out laughing, the rest of the girls joining. Even Nellie. I have to stop myself from glaring at her. "Um, how many of those have you had? And we haven't."

"What!" Bonnie spits out her drink, leaning forward. "Never?"

I shake my head, looking to Karli. "Can I steal a smoke?"

"Sure, honey." She tosses me her pack. "What's mine is yours. Especially if you can get Sicko on board."

I take a stick out, pausing at her words.

Bonnie scolds her. "Leave the girl alone, ya big sex addict." Bonnie points to Karli. "She and Justice, her old man, are swingers. Ignore her digs, baby girl."

After the initial shock disappears, a throaty chuckle vibrates out from me. Damn. Maybe those drinks are strong. Clutching my stomach, I shake my head. "Oh my god." Swiping the tears from my eyes, I fill up my cup, low-key taking Silver's away from her.

"What!" Karli says defensively. "Why are y'all surprised?"

Karli, I would guess, is in her mid-forties, with long brown hair and a figure to die for. The cut lines in her arms a display on how hard she works out. "I guess I just assumed bikers were, I don't know—"

"—cavemen?" Bonnie says, a smirk on her painted red lips. "They are, these two are just weird."

"Well, this is good to know. Nice to meet you, Karli."

Karli leans forward to blaze my smoke. "Anytime, honey. I will say, Sicko definitely has his hands full with you."

"Oh, come on." Silver chuckles, dancing in her chair. "We all know Sicko plays in the sandbox and has with Bea. But you know what?" Silver says, watching me with careful eyes. "I don't think he will with her."

"I need shots." I shake my head, puffing on my cigarette. I've always had trouble making friends. Opening up myself and allowing myself to trust someone enough to call them a friend. I guess that's why I've always only kept to Sloane.

"Here you go." Nellie slides over a bottle of tequila. I narrow my eyes on the bowl of salt and limes beside her arm.

"You poisoned mine?"

Nellie rolls her blue eyes. "No, bitch. I'd rather not be buried in the back yard with my pops yet, if that's alright with you."

I take the bottle from her, flicking off the lid. "I don't trust you."

I lick the side of my thumb and sprinkle salt over the top.

"I earned that."

"I don't really like you either." I lick the salt off my hand and shoot back the tequila, squeezing a wedge of lime between my teeth, even though I don't need it.

"Now, I didn't earn that. You'll warm to me." Nellie smiles at me.

"I don't warm, I'm ice cold, and once someone fucks me over, I never forget." I wrap my lips around the bottle and suck down another gulp. I'm probably being mean, but the girl deceived us.

"Tough shit, *baby girl*," Nellie says, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'll always be here."

Eh. The alcohol is fulfilling its purpose, that warmth I just said I didn't have working its way through my veins.

Silver picks up her cup, standing on the table, her ass twerking in the air to "So Good" by Big Sean. "If you both are just going to fight, I'm going to dance. You dance, Jade? You look like you could."

I chuckle, pouring more margarita into my cup, and adding more tequila into it. "Oh dance? Only when I'm drunk..."

Karli jumps up on top of the table with a fit of laughter, dragging Bonnie up with her. Every time I've been around these girls since I've known them, I find myself happy. Fulfilled. With all the tequila running through my system, and the need to conceal what happened tonight with James, along with all of the endorphins pumping through my veins from whatever that was between Royce and I, I rap off the lyrics while climbing up on top of the table with them. They all roar with praise of me finally joining. I stick my tongue up against my top lip while gyrating my hips. I've known these girls for all of five minutes and they've felt more like family to me than my own ever could have given me. This clubhouse feels more like home than the forty-million-dollar mansion I was raised in.

"What the fuck!" Someone swears in the background, but we all ignore it. I sing one part in the verse—the one about doing something to his soul—when I'm being pulled down off the table, Royce's arm hooked securely around my back.

"Ohhhh, Siiicckkoooo!" Silver slurs, and Gypsy glares at her from below.

"Do you have to be a pisshead while your old man is away on a run?" Gypsy grabs her by the wrist and swings her over his shoulder, carrying her limp body into the house.

"And that, my friends, is why I didn't get up on that table." Nellie chuckles up at Karli, who's left dancing alone.

I turn in Royce's grip, his chest to mine. "I'm fine. I just need my drink." I lean back to reach for it but Royce whacks the cup off the table, the contents splashing out across the ground. His jaw clenches as his hands dive into his pocket. He tosses his keys at Wicked, who's watching us both carefully. "Drive us home."

"I just got here!" I say, confused. I love the clubhouse.

"And now you're leaving." Royce's hand falls into mine. Our fingers intertwine as he directs me to the garage where the bikes are lined up. There's another shed behind the

parking lot and beside the bigger shed where the bar and party time usually is, with a large metal sheet door closed.

Wicked comes up beside me as Royce opens the garage door, sliding it open. "You really didn't think that was going to happen?" Wicked asks under his breath.

"He said he doesn't give a shit about me anymore, so no, I didn't think that would happen."

"For someone apparently so smart, you're sure dumb as fuck," Wicked growls, following Royce into the garage.

"Royce!" a girly voice calls out from behind. I'm sick of all the vaginas that want him. "Can I come?"

I turn, studying her up and down. "I can answer that, and it's a no."

Royce steps up behind me, his fingers sprawling out over my belly, before pushing me behind him.

"Get in the car." He turns to Bea. "No, you can't."

"But I haven't been to your house!" Bea drops her bottom lip.

I turn around to say something else when Wicked's hand covers my mouth and he starts dragging me to the shed, opening the door and tossing me into the back seat like I weigh nothing.

"Wicked!" I yell at him, just as he slides into the driver's seat and starts up the car.

I freeze. Familiar earthy rumbling of an angry V8 tremors beneath my butt, so I start taking in the details of the car. Tight leather seats, aged steering wheel. "This is his Charger."

"Yep," Wicked says, leaning his head on the misty window.

"Huh," I scoff, shaking my head. "Of course he kept his car, just couldn't keep me." My eyes find him and Bea, who are still talking in front of us. Wicked hasn't turned the headlights on yet, probably because it will flash through the entire compound.

"What is she to him anyway?"

Wicked chuckles. “She’s just one of the many girls Royce keeps around to fuck him until he can’t see straight. That’s all.” He leans forward and flicks on the radio, pushing the touchscreen and connecting to Bluetooth.

I pause as Bea leans up on her tippy toes, her fingers around Royce’s neck. She kisses him hard and I look away, not wanting to watch anymore.

“Oh, bitch just kissed him.” Wicked shakes his head. “Royce doesn’t kiss anyone.”

I ignore everyone now, pulling out my phone and flicking through my text messages.

“Why’d you text me?” I say, my eyes connect to his in the review mirror.

“You wanna do this now?” His brow arches in question.

The back door opens on the other side of me, Royce’s cologne spilling into my bubble. I move as far away from him as possible, anger searing through my veins about him and Bea, and then I find myself angry that I’m angry at him.

Wicked revs the car loud enough to shake the tin shed and drives us out of the garage. “Rehab” from Machine Gun Kelly starts playing as I continue to flick through the photos on my phone. Anything to not look at Royce. His hand comes to my chin, turning my head to face him. My jaw is set, my eyes faded. Wicked cranks up the song and I wish he didn’t. The lyrics hit me on levels they shouldn’t be able to reach.

He’s fixed on me, searching my face as we drive by streetlights. With every passing, the light only illuminates his features. I wait for him to say something, anything. He doesn’t. His eyes fall to my lips before going down to my breasts, to my exposed belly, before coming back up to meet mine.

“You mad?” he mouths with a smirk. The music is too loud to hear him.

I’m done.

I rip off my belt and move across the seat. He doesn't even seem fazed or shocked as I wrap my thighs around his waist and settle on top of his hard body. He inches back by spreading his legs wide, resting his head against the top of the seat. His eyes remain on mine and my heart beats furiously in my chest. "Yes, I'm mad," I say loudly, sliding my thumb between his lips. He bites on it roughly, his hands cupping my ass. *Thud. Thud.*

His other hand comes up behind my neck, pulling my face closer to his. "Fucking stop pulling away from me then."

My lips drop to his and he opens slightly, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth. I deepen the kiss, bringing him closer, his hips meeting the inside of my thighs. The pain that was there is dissolving with every thrust. Having Royce under my grip is enough for me to forget, even if just for now. Just when I think he's going to pull away from me, he flips me onto my back until I'm lying spread eagle over the seats, and sinks between my legs, his mouth never leaving mine. His tongue explores my mouth, flicking, rubbing, and massaging over mine. Wicked must crank the music up even more to cut us out as he picks up the speed.

Royce's hand is on the front of my throat when he leans up, catching his breath as my eyes search his. I can almost hear the thoughts rushing around in his head. Bringing my hand to the back of his neck, I tug him back down to me, grazing my lips over his.

"Stop thinking."

He growls against my lips and withdraws, retreating back to his side of the car and leaving me high and dry.

Sighing, I pull myself up into my seat and fix my eyes on the back of Wicked's head. More lights pass, and I squint to see if what I'm noticing on the back of his neck is really there. The scar that's poking out behind his shirt becomes more visible.

My eardrums pulse as the lights flick over his neck.

I can't expose the fact that I know what that scar is or means, for the very reason that I have the exact same one on my ankle.

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Royce

Kissing never made sense to me. It was something that seemed redundant. I didn't want bitch's lips on mine, I'd much rather them be wrapped around my cock, but I dropped the ball. I got out of hand, by the same hands that always wanted to fix me. Fix my problems. Tell her my secrets, or fuck, just look me right in the eye and conjure my soul to give them all to her. That's what Jade is to me. She's a walking, talking, fucking witch that is everything my soul wants and craves. My body craves her, but my soul fucking needs her. Having her lips on mine was every fucking thing I thought it would be, and that's what pisses me off the most.

"She still in bed?" Wicked asks, wrapping his knuckles with tape.

I stretch out my neck, swinging my arms around to warm up. "Yeah, she crashed as soon as I put her in there last night."

Wicked seems suspiciously interested. "In your bed?"

I flip him off. "We've been sharing a bed since we were kids, fucker. Nothing different."

"You're right, brother. No different. Oh that's right, except for the fact that now you want to put your dick inside her."

I chuckle, turning on the stereo. I set up the undercover garage outside as a gym. Boxing bags, weights. I needed it to keep me busy, but now it's pretty much a Wolf Pack gym. "Yeah, but that can't happen." I start pounding my fist into the punching bag.

"Wanna remind me why?" Wicked cautiously asks, holding the bag in place. "You're Sicko, the fucking legend on the streets with a signature. No one would ever want to fuck with you. So, why?"

I clench my jaw. "It's complicated."

"How so?"

"You asking a lot of questions today, or what?" I lay into the bag as Cypress Hill hums loudly in the background. "Because your face is a little too close to be asking so many questions."

Wicked sighs before chuckling. "All I'm saying is that the three of you are pretty fucking secretive as to why you're all to stay away from her. I'm just curious as to why."

I stop punching, unwrapping my wrist and tossing the rags across the ground, swiping the sweat from my abs. "Because she has to stay away from all of us. It was part of the deal."

His face pales. "Yeah, I get it now."

"Good." I toss my water bottle across the ground, grazing my hand over the scar on my left pec.



Jade

I was annoyed with myself on how quick I went to sleep last night. I at least wanted to make it a little harder for him, what with him kissing me and then pulling away.

Taking out the milk from the fridge, I look around the house. It's exactly what I would have thought Royce to own. The large windows that overlook the beachfront being the main attraction, with its pointed arch all the way to the roof and mahogany stained wood. The furniture is all clean leather sofas, with a big TV hanging on the wall. The kitchen is filled with stainless-steel appliances, yet the décor has a gentle feminine touch to it. I instantly think that maybe Royce had someone else in his life. This house has definitely been lived in by another female. The cow skull hanging over the front door, to the Persian rugs spread over the wooden floorboards. The house is beautiful. Breathtaking. But the stench of perfume haunts all the furnishings.

I take my glass of milk to the front of the living room, needing a better view of the water. I chuckle when I see the ski boat wrapped around his private dock. The fairy lights twist and knot around the railing leading to it. To the right, there's a large tree with claw-like branches, hanging over a

fire pit that has scattered chopped logs placed around in a circle for seating. He really built his own life, and I just came back in and crashed it.

"Almost called her Jade two-point-oh." I don't turn to face him, unable to pull myself from the allure of the ocean.

"It's beautiful here," I whisper, finally turning. "You know that, right?"

His body shifts carefully. My chest swells and my stomach drops to the ground. "I know, Duchess."

I clear my throat. "Did you design it? Because I gotta say..."

Laughter rolls off him, taking the two steps down to the living room, coming closer to me. My fingers tense around the glass in my hand. "Hell no. India did. She's a famous interior designer in The Hills. Has a TV show and shit on Netflix for it."

I snort, sipping on my milk. "I've seen it. She's changed a lot."

"She has."

I try to conceal the hurt in my chest at how easily these boys moved on. I know that's what you're supposed to do, but they were all I knew all of my life, and then within six months they were gone. All three of them.

"Hmmm," I murmur, ignoring the intensity of Royce's gaze by turning back to the beach.

"Jade," he growls from behind me. "Turn around."

"Mmmm, nope. I'm good." I can't look at him right now. I'm afraid he'll see the secrets I'm hiding beneath, regardless of how bad I *want* to. I want to kiss him again, too, and I want him to wrap me in his arms and remind me where my happy place always is.

He clears his throat after a long beat of silence. "Remember when you were four-years-old and you'd cry every night. You weren't sure why, but you did. So I'd sneak into your room and let you sleep on my chest." My heart cracks in my chest, but instead of it being from pain, it

cracks open to allow Royce back in. Piercing ringing blares through my ears. He laughs. "It was the only way you could get to sleep for two fucking years. Tired the shit out of me, but it was my most favorite part of being your brother."

"What's your point, Roy?" I finally face him, tears pooling at the corner of my eyes.

He catches one with his thumb and brings it to his mouth, sucking the drop off. I ignore the way his plush lips cushion around his thumb for the sake of my ovaries. "My point is how do I go from that to wanting to bend you over this couch and fuck you until you fucking scream. Hmmm?"

"I don't know," I say, blinking. "Maybe the same way you left me in that house alone."

"Oh fuck, Dutch." He shakes his head, grabbing at his hair, frustrated. "When are you going to drop that fucking shit? I did what I had to do, and that's the answer that you're just going to have to live with." He turns his back to me, walking away. It only infuriates me even more.

"It's not fucking good enough, Royce!" I snap. He ignores me again and before I can stop myself, I raise my hand up and throw my empty glass across the room until it smacks him on the back of his head. Sweat glistens over his bare chest when he turns. I was so caught up in my outburst that I missed the tattoos that cover his whole back. Before I can tilt my head to study them, he's storming back to me, grabbing me by my throat and cutting off my airway while throwing me onto the leather lounge.

"I dare you." His eyes are on mine, furious, as his lips curl around his teeth. "To fucking hit me and see what the fuck I do."

I wriggle from under his grip and his hands fly around the place, snatching my wrists to push them above my head.

"No shit, I'm going to fucking kill you."

"Good!" I snap, overcome with emotion. "At least that will make it go away."

His jaw tenses. “Make what go away? See, you keep saying shit like that and it makes me angsty.” He tightens his grip around my wrists. “And I’m almost certain you don’t want me feeling that way.”

“Royce?”

“What?” he says, his eyes falling to my lips.

“Get off me.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up in a smirk as he jackknifes off my body. As soon as his weight is gone, I sigh, stretching my legs out. “Can you take me back to the dorm? I have to catch up on my homework.”

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Royce

I flick the knife between my index finger and my ring finger, rolling it between each one as the old clock ticks in the background, filling the silence with its loud, rusted hands.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

"Do you know why you're here?" There was a TV in the middle of the room with a video playing. We couldn't see his face, but he was dressed in all black. "I'll tell you." We're in a room. Cold. Dark. Basement? My wrists were bound to the back of the chair, my mouth tied closed. I found Orson and Storm beside me, dazed and confused. It was a big fucking night last night. Way bigger than we had anticipated. In fact, O wasn't supposed to be drinking at all because of his game today.

I pulled on my ties. We'd been fucking kidnapped. Anger seeped into my pores, my muscles flexing with tension. Motherfucker.

The video began to fuzz, like the old box TVs then it came clear. A single black seat, dark leather cushions, a black hoodie with black slacks, and glossy loafers. I was

raised in money, spoke fluent ‘rich motherfucker’, and although this motherfucker used the hoodie as a blanket for his identity, I knew for a fact he knew money too. “Each of you are leaving. Tonight. Your life has been pushed into fast-forward.”

Growling, I tried to bite the rag out of my mouth to no avail. Orson was jumping around in his chair, attempting to pull from his ties while Storm remained quiet, watching the TV as if studying every single detail. We were fucking eighteen years old. What the fuck could he want with us? Obviously not money, so it must be a favor from one, or all of our parents. You have three of the richest fucks in America sitting in one room, bound and tied, and you know that it has something to do with the parents.

His voice comes back, the robotic tone a dead giveaway that this asshole didn’t want us to know who he was. “Before you even try to refuse, I will tell you right now that there’s one very good reason why each of you are going to listen to every single word that comes out of my mouth and not just obey me, but fear me.”

Not likely, you fucking cunt.

“You will all be released from your room, with the equipment you need to make your way back to civilization. I’m sure you will admire my technique one day.” He leaned forward, and his necklace caught my eye. “All three of you will go home, and you will each find a folder on your bed. In that folder will be the reason why you’re going to listen to me. You were all set to go to college. You’re leaving earlier. You are to be out of your homes no later than midnight tonight. If you try to tell anyone. Your friend. Girlfriend. Parent. Aunt. I will gut them, turn their organs into clothing, and sell them on Etsy.” He paused, and we all waited.

He was fucking crazy, but there was an air of fear that his words left in the room well after he spoke them. A threat that didn’t need weapons.

"If you do not leave—" Here it was. The big I'll kill you. "Your sister Jade Olivia Kane—" The blood drained from my veins and if I wasn't physically a completely healthy man, I'd bleed out on the ground from the mere whisper of her name from his lips. "Will become mine. When I say mine, I mean you would wish that I had just killed her by the time I was done. I would haunt your every single step with her, hang her in front of you like my ragdoll, tearing her at the seams and never stitching her back up, and if you think I don't have that kind of power, I urge you to go home, check out the folder, open up your little laptops or phones, and simply type in the words K Diamond."

My jaw tensed and everything inside of my body burned.

He relaxed back into his chair. "I trust you will make the right choice, gentlemen, and when you're settled into your life, I will be back, and if I'm not, that means that one of you fucked up along the way and my arrival, will not be one that you will like." The ceiling opened up and knives fell onto our laps. "You are dismissed."

We paused, watching the TV after the video had long since cut out. It took us a while to wriggle around and cut ourselves loose, but once our hands were done, everything else fell away.

"What the fuck was that?" I snapped, glaring at both Orson and Storm.

Orson shook his head. "I don't know, bro. I don't like it."

Heading toward the door, I pulled it open and stepped out onto the deck, confused. "We're on a yacht."

"What?" Storm stepped out from behind me with Orson on his tail. The door slammed closed behind him and when I reached back for it, it remained locked.

"Fuck." Quickly making our way through the power yacht, we jogged up the stairs that lead to the main cabin and I paused, seeing the ocean on one side and the shoreline hundreds of meters away on the other.

"What the fuck is going on?" Orson's confusion only annoyed me. None of us know.

"We have to listen to him." I knew he was rich, but this yacht was something that only people like our families could afford. This wasn't a little fucking toy. This was a damn multi-million-dollar machine.

"Why?" Orson said. "He could be bluffing."

I found three surfboards lined at the back, standing upright with our names written on pieces of paper and slapped on them with a thick load of sex wax. "Because I'm not willing to bet on Jade."

Orson silenced.

Storm reached for his board. "I'm with Royce."

"I didn't mean it like that—" Orson attempted to clarify. "You're right. We'll figure this shit out back on shore."

All three of us grabbed our boards, dove into the ice-cold water at the still of the night, and awaited the first wave to come up so we could catch it and ride all the way to the shoreline.

When I got home, I wish I could say he was bluffing.

"What's happening?" Storm asks, closing my front door behind himself as he enters. "Man, can you light a fire or something? It's cold in here."

"Because Duchess has been here, that's why." I watch him move into my sitting room where he falls down onto the single lounge chair, his hair ruffled from his flight.

"Are you going to explain why you called this meeting? I was in the middle of something important." Storm had always been the level-headed one out of us all. The one who used his brain more than he used his mouth. It was helpful. Real fucking helpful. Especially when you have Orson and me in a group of three. But over the years, Storm has opened up a whole fucking lot. I shouldn't blame that on his wife and him becoming a dad so young, but I know it does have something to do with that. He knocked up the first

bitch he found straight after we left and although he's one of the wealthiest computer software engineers in the United States of America and runs the most exclusive computer science business on the side, I can't help but resent her a whole fucking lot.

Mainly because she's a gold-digging bitch.

"I'll wait until O gets here," I say, pointing to the corner where all the liquor is housed. A few minutes later, Orson is walking through the door, dragging his suitcase behind him.

"Yo, I had to catch the fucking red-eye last night just to make it on time. This better be important," he grunts, shutting the door.

I pour him a glass of scotch and hand it to him, removing my vest and placing it on the sofa. When I'm with the three of them, the cut comes off. My club will always come first, but not when it comes to this.

"I need to ask you both a question and I need you to answer it truthfully."

Orson sighs, flopping onto the L-shaped couch that overlooks the ocean. "You couldn't ask this question through FaceTime? Like damn, I missed you too, but it's off season and me and the family are gearing up to go to Aspen."

I ignore him, leaning against the mantle of the fireplace.

"Have either of you veered off track?"

They all pause, their eyes coming to mine.

Storm is the first to answer. "I haven't needed to. He never asked me to do anything more than leave town."

"Same here." Orson lifts his glass, swallowing the expensive whiskey in one swig.

"You?" they both ask, brows raised.

"I wasn't asked to do anything either." I squeeze my eyes closed. "Any of you been sent a video?"

They both answer in unison. "No."

I pull out my phone and flick through my photos until I find it, tossing my phone onto the sofa beside Orson.

He picks it up and I watch as his face contorts into confusion. His lips pinch, his eyes narrow, and his head tilts. “Who is she?”

I shrug. “Don’t fucking know.”

Storm refuses to look, his eyes remaining fixed on the wall in front of him. “Maybe he’s testing us by using bait this time instead of each other.”

My mouth snaps closed. I don’t want to reopen that wound and double the healing time.

I glare at him. “I’m pretty sure he made it clear the first time.” Shaking my head, I take a seat on the sofa in front of me, running my hands through my hair. “Nah, this is something else. We’re missing something.”

Silence wraps around our memories as I’m sure all of us block them out. Memories are the stain that either good or evil leave on your soul well after departure.

This one is evil. So very fucking evil.

“What about Wicked?” Orson asks, his eyes on mine. “Asked him anything?”

So fucking Wicked.

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Jade

Twisting my hair onto the side of my neck, I ignore the music playing in the background and the heavy stench of sex. Fingers stretch out over my belly, covering the black tight dress that I'm wearing. It's long in the back while cutting short at the front. I paired it with black thigh-high boots and braided my hair into a messy French braid. I don't know why we're here again so early.

L'artisaniant. James had said that they only do them once a month, so why now.

Bringing the glass up to my mouth, I'm quick to find the room I was in the last time that I was here. Everyone around me fades to the background of my mind as I study it like it's the most important test in history.

Running the cushion of my thumb across my lips, goose bumps shiver down my spine as memories flash back to me. It felt different with them. Sex never felt like that with James, or any of the men he pawned me off to.

James spins me around to him, his mask is the same. Simple black leather carving around his features. It covers most of what a mask normally would. "Why are you wearing a mask but not me?" I ask, watching his reaction carefully.

Since the second hotel video, things between James and I have shifted drastically. I used to trust him to a certain extent, and that was probably from years and years of being handled by him. But now I just want to run.

“Hmmmm.” He gestures to the elevators that are hidden behind the sea of people. I chew on my lip nervously before finally following him toward the rustic metal doors. The elevator is one of the old ones, where you slide the metal gate across manually. Once we’ve entered and the music cuts out from *premier niveau*, the elevator ascends as my fists tighten. I watch as the old hand stops at *deux*. Sweat seeps down the nape of my neck as the hand shifts again. *Trois*. We don’t stop. Not until *quatre*.

We’re instantly in a room dipped with darkness. There are teal lights placed sporadically around the room, but not enough to offer much sight. The teal tint is more on the green spectrum and it’s an odd color choice, but it fits with the aesthetic that seems to shift around the room quietly. There’s a black leather couch right in the middle, no windows or curtains, no sign of light except for the LED lines that stick to the rim of the skirtings. I want to ask what we’re doing here.

Why this place?

A mask is placed over my eyes as James’ mouth lowers to the nape of my neck. “Now you need it.”

I gulp past my nerves, wiping the sweat off the palms of my hands. “Okay.” The lighting dims even further and the music gains volume. In the other room, it felt intimate.

This one feels more charged.

Just. More.

Korn “Twisted Transistor” is playing heavily in the background as James moves farther into the room. He pauses at the threshold where the lounge and another room join, his hands in his pockets.

“Boys.”

Oh fuck.

I take the steps I need to reach where he stands, and when I bring my eyes up in front of me, I freeze.

Four men.

All wearing dark clothes, and dark leather masks that cover the top halves of their face. *Level fucking four.*

They're all scattered, seated in different seats. There's a small makeshift stage in the middle of the room, and when James leaves me standing there on my own, I realize what I'm supposed to do.

James strolls toward a small bar area where a tender stands behind in a white suit. He orders a drink and turns to face me.

His voice comes through again, only distorted. He likes his toys to manipulate his words. As if he knows why he does what he does and who he's hiding from.

"Change" from Deftones starts playing loudly, and I find myself checking everyone who is here.

Two are wearing dark hoodies, their mouths blanketed with white bandanas, one is wearing an expensive suit with a black leather mask, hiding the top half of his face, and the final guy is wearing a leather jacket with a hoodie underneath, with the same plain white bandana around his mouth.

I run my tongue over my lips, placing my phone onto the floor and making my way to the makeshift stage. This isn't new. James has had me dance for people in the past, but it was always for a purpose. To entertain rich, fat men who had too much money and not enough humanity. It would tease them. James would say that I was a direct image of the kind of girls he had for sale.

I found that disturbing, but there's nothing I could ever do about it.

The song continues to play into the chorus and my fingers flex around the cold pole as I tousle my hair out of the braid. Rolling my body off the pole, I allow my mind to drift to other places, only once I'm turned away from them,

someone is at my back, his fingers spread out over my lower belly.

I recognize his touch almost instantly, and before I can think too much into it, I realize the reason why I recognized it is because he was one of the two guys from the first night I attended.

Sighing, I press my cheek against the cool metal of the pole as his finger dives into the waistband of my panties.

When my eyes fly over my shoulder to find James, he's gone.

My shoulders relax as my fingers flex around the pole, grinding my ass into the crotch of his pants. His fingers move around my hips as he yanks me around to face him.

His head tilts.

"Lapdance" by N.E.R.D starts as his hand finds the curve of my throat, his other diving into the front of my panties. Frustration fights pleasure as I attempt to find his eyes. *Who the fuck are you?*

His fingers come to my ass as he lifts me off the ground, and I wrap my legs around his waist, just as someone else comes up behind me, unzipping my dress. It falls around my shoulders and he tugs it off, over my head, my hair flopping down my lower back. The guy in front of me rolls and leans down and sinks his teeth into the skin at my collarbone.

I moan, tilting my head for him as the one behind me dips beneath my panties.

"Fuck!" someone roars behind us, so loud the music is drowned out momentarily. "Yo! Stop!" Hands come to the shoulder of the guy who is holding me.

The voice sounds familiar.

When the guy who is holding me sets me back to the ground, spinning around to face his friend angrily, I watch in slow motion as he snatches my phone off him. His shoulders tense as he slowly turns with my phone in his hands.

My phone? Shit.

"What!" I snap, annoyed that I'm sitting in the middle of a makeshift stage in my bra and panties while they're all staring at me like they've never seen it before.

He throws my phone across the room and takes three angry strides to me, yanking me up by my arms and tearing off my mask.

I gasp, my eyes furious. "What the fuck!"

He pulls off the bandana that's around his face and my world stops. My stomach falls to the ground and solidifies at my feet.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Duchess?" Royce's face comes into full view, and I blink a few times to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

Reaching up to the rim of his hoodie, I shove it off his head until it falls around his tattooed neck.

"Oh shit," I whisper, my blood turning as cold as ice.

He backs me up until I'm colliding into the chest of the guy who is behind me. Royce's eyes furiously fly over my shoulder, and I watch as his jaw sets to stone, his eyes burning up all the energy in the room. "Get. The fuck. Away from her." His tone is low, dangerous, and a thousand levels above the temperature of Hell. The music cuts off in the background as Royce gathers up my clothes from around my feet and shoves them into my chest. "Get changed. Fucking now!"

I do as I'm told. *What is happening?* Shoving on my crop top and yanking my skirt back down, panic seizes my muscles as I furiously search around the room. Royce pulls at his hair in frustration as he sits on the sofa, a cigarette between his two fingers.

"Roy, what the fuck?"

"Shiiit," one of the others murmur, removing his bandana.

I still. "Orson!"

Orson shakes his head, running his hands over his mouth. "'Sup, Duchess."

I pale, walking over to him and wrapping my arms around the back of his neck. "You're married! What the fuck are you doing here?"

"We have a different kind of marriage."

My muscles tense. "L'artisanant, it's French..." Putting the pieces together about Orson being part French. He flashes me a sad smile. "Yeah, Dutch. We—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Royce growls without looking up at us. When I turn to see the final two guys have removed their bandanas and masks, I'm not even slightly surprised to see one is Storm, but I am to see the other is Wicked.

I gulp, my eyes falling down his body. Judging by the fact that Storm is too lean and Orson too tall, I'm gathering it was him and Royce who I had sex with the first night.

Oh god.

I fucked my foster brother without even realizing.

The room tilts as I drop down onto the stage, disbelief rendering me speechless.

"Royce," I whisper, willing him to look at me.

He doesn't move, his shoulders rolling up and down as he takes deep breaths. When I don't think he's going to say anything and Orson disappears to the bar to grab a few bottles of top-shelf whiskey, I crawl across the floor until I'm in front of him, my hands on his knees.

"Royce..." I repeat. "Look at me."

The muscles in his thighs tense. He whacks my hands off his knees, leans back on the sofa while placing the cigarette between his lips, and pinches his eyes closed. The scowl that's etched into his brows carve enough fear into my marrow that my feet twitch to run, but I stay. Because I need to do this. Because I know that he's going to lash out, and he's going to try to hurt me, it's how he deals with his emotions. He deals with his manic emotions by pretending that he doesn't have any, but he forgets that our souls were one once upon a time. I feel what he feels.

I straighten my shoulders, willing the tears to not escape.

I will not look weak.

I didn't go through all that I have over the past four years all to crumble at the hands of Royce.

He glares at me through new eyes, the very same that he showed me when he first came home. This time feels different, though. Shame flushes through me in waves of heat.

"Answer me this," he mutters around his smoke. I reach for his pack on the ground and blaze my own. I know I'm going to need it for the next question that he's going to ask me. And all the others that will come after. He sucks in deeply, all the tense muscles in his face smoothing, and then I watch as he blows smoke rings out from his curled lips. "Was it you here the other night? With the same man?"

I clench my teeth. "Yes."

His lip curls in a snarl as he leans forward, grabbing me by my chin and tilting my face up to his. The position I'm in now isn't in my favor, like his perfect little pet sitting at his feet. Just when I think he's about to say something, he squeezes my chin, pushing me away from him, before standing tall.

"Royce," Wicked scolds from behind me, and when the door slams in his retreat, the first tear drops. I don't even fight them anymore, the emotion that's rolling around inside of me is uncontainable.

I bring my knees up to my chest and rest my forehead on the top. My cheeks burn with shame, my shoulders hunching protectively.

"Duchess," Storm says, his hand on my shoulder. "You know how h—"

"Shut the fuck up, Storm." Orson scoops me up from the ground, bringing me to the sofa with him. I swipe the tears from my face as Orson dips out of the room on the other side, bringing me back a woolen blanket.

He covers my body and hands me the bottle of whiskey. "Figure you might need it."

I nod, wrapping my lips around the rim as I feel Wicked move in behind me, his arm spreading out over the rim of the sofa. “It was you?” I ask through cracked lips, after the whiskey long since departs, leaving its stain in my throat. I run the tip of my index finger over his flawless skin, tracing the deep blue lines of his veins in his arms. So pale.

Wicked’s other hand comes to my outer hip, tucking me under him. “Yeah.”

I swallow roughly. “Well, I’m relieved it wasn’t one of these fuckers.”

“Hey!” Storm laughs, taking a seat on the stage as Orson comes to the other side of me. “But true.” He and Orson laugh sadly before I feel both of their eyes on mine.

“Duchess,” Orson says gently. “Who is that man that you were with? What are you doing here?”

“Mmmm,” Royce ponders from the other side of the room and my spine snaps straight. “What are you doing here, Dutch, and who the fuck is that man?” When he enters into the room with half a bottle of whiskey gone and hanging from his fingers, he takes a seat on the stage while leaning against the pole, drawing his leg up to his chest while dangling his arm off it.

“I can’t answer that,” I explain, ignoring Royce’s eyes. He’s hurt me more times than I can count, but before tonight, it all seemed superficial. Like when a friend would hurt you in elementary school, and you’d get over it in a few days.

This is different now. I’m afraid that he won’t see me the same way now that he knows that not only have we already had sex, but I’ve also had sex with Wicked.

“What are you thinking, Duchess?” Royce taunts, and I swipe the next tear that falls down my cheek quickly. “Everyone get out. Now.”

“Me?” Wicked asks, his arm tensing in my peripheral.

Royce’s heavy chuckle cracks down the center of my spine. “Especially you.”

Orson and Storm move out first before Wicked begrudgingly pulls away from me and leaves the same way they did. When the door closes and the noise is cut out, I notice the music still playing, it's just quieter now.

"Jade," Royce demands my attention, and I finally bring myself to face him. Fatigue seizes my muscles. I'm drained. My eyelids are damp and sticky from all of my tears and my throat aches, right down to the burning fire in my lungs. "Who is he?"

My lip trembles. "Roy, I can—"

"Fuck, Jade!" he barks, hurling the half-empty bottle across the room until it smashes against the wall and shards of glass dipped in amber-colored liquid spray against the opaque walls. "Don't keep shit from me!"

"I can't!" I scream, but my goddamn stupid emotions make me hiccup around each syllable. "I just can't—" *hiccup* "—tell you, Royce!"

He stands from his position, strutting toward me. He slides his finger into my mouth. "Do I need to slide my cock between these lips to remind them that bad things can come out of them?" he gloats, leaning down until his lips are a whisper away from mine. "Or maybe I just need to fill your cunt with my cock and fuck you so hard that your secrets beg to run from me."

I still, the fist he's punched into my gut throbs with unbearable pain. Cool air blows through my blood, my body shivering with frost. *He is already judging me.* "Fuck you!"

His hand is at my chin and his nose pressing against mine. "Tell me who the fuck your little boyfriend is, Jade, and I promise I won't make you watch as I cut him up into little tiny pieces and scatter his limbs all over the fucking Pacific Ocean."

I push away from his grip. "He's not my boyfriend. I can't tell you anything else, Roy. You can't make me talk."

He exhales, pulling out another cigarette and putting it between his lips, just as the door opens in the background

and Wicked waltzes back in, now with his MC vest over his hoodie.

"We got a problem," Wicked interrupts, doing a quick scan of me before going to Royce. "The boyfriend heard us talking about what just happened. Before I could get my hands around his neck, he bolted."

I watch in horror as the color drains from Royce's face and his thick black brows curve in around his eyes. His pupils dilate, baring his sharp teeth. His anger crackles through the room like a thunderstorm.

"Royce..." I reach for his hand. I need him. I need to feel his forgiveness even if he technically doesn't want to give it right now.

He recoils away from me. "You are coming back to my fuckin' house, and you are not leaving unless it's on the back of my goddamn bike, or in my car." He turns his face toward me completely. His sharp jaw twitches, the tattoos beneath the skin on his neck stretching. I'm momentarily lost in how much he has changed over the years. His skin remained soft and features still too pretty, but the tattoos and muscles douse his looks in something deadly and flammable. "Do I make myself fucking clear?"

The room comes back into real time as I nod. "Yes, okay." I don't want to agree to this, but there's a little bit of me that wants to be near him right now, another part of me that is hoping to calm him down, but the biggest part of the fight that's happening inside of me right now is fear. I'm genuinely afraid of what James might do to me now that he knows I know that Royce is in here.

Did he know that this was Royce?

The muscles in my face instantly release, my mouth falling open slightly.

"What?" Royce snaps. "What the fuck is going on in your head right now?"

I clear my throat. "Nothing."

Lying never felt so wrong.

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Royce

I scowl at Wicked as I go back to Jade. She's fucking hiding shit from me, I know it. Orson knows it, Storm knows it, and most annoyingly of all, Wicked fucking knows it.

Jade stands from the sofa, and all eyes are on her when she moves. "Bathroom?"

I nudge my head over my shoulder. "Back room. If you're not out in four minutes, I'm kicking down the fucking door."

Jade ignores me, brushing past and disappearing through the door.

"Are you always this hard on her?" Wicked asks.

I cock my head, studying him closely. I have two options right now. I can put him back into the place he so conveniently seemed to have crawled out of, while still being able to salvage what's left of our friendship, or I can play the trick.

"Oh, you're clearly new here." Storm snickers from behind the bar. "That's timid compared to what she's used to."

Orson is quiet on the other side of the room, but my focus hasn't waned from Wicked. I'm like a shark sensing blood now, and that blood spilled from Wicked.

"You notice the dismissive nature that girl throws at him?" Orson finally adds. "That comes from years and years of built up resilience after putting up with Royce Kane's straight-up bullshit."

I flip him off. He ain't wrong.

"She's hiding something," Wicked points out, leaning against the wall. "We need to find out what that is."

"I know that," I hiss, a little too quickly. I know why I'm more threatened by Wicked than I am of any of the others here, and that's because the other two have always looked at Jade as their own sister. None of them have ever tried to get with her, nor would they. Jade Olivia Kane had my name stamped over her fucking ass as a newborn baby, and there wasn't a damn fucking thing she could do to remove it. I knew it. Our friends knew it. Hell, our fucking parents knew it. "No one knows Jade better than I do."

"Really." Wicked tests the waters he really shouldn't be treading into. "Then why don't you know what she's hiding?"

"Simple, really." Jade drifts in from behind me, but I don't shift. I mentally count to twenty in my head to stop me from rearing forward and ripping Wicked's throat right out of his neck. *Breathe in and out.* Jade continues. "I know how to keep secrets from him now."

She picks up her phone from the sofa, and I watch as her fingers grasp around the black case.

Perfect white manicure. Simple, clean, yet knowing exactly what to do with it. The only thing worse than an innocent woman is one who knows exactly how to use it to bring evil to their knees. I don't know why the white sticks to me, but it does. It catches my attention mainly because Jade is anything but the purity she's trying to proclaim painted on her nails. It's a statement.

"Shall we go?" she adds, and I finally stand, making my way to Wicked.

When everyone is out of earshot, I grind my teeth and lock him with my glare. Wicked is a tank, and he knows how to fight and hold his own, but make no mistake, I can fucking take him. You give a man something worth fighting for and he'll fight to the death. Jade is fight bait for me. You hang her sexy ass up in front of me and I'll kill anyone who dares come near her.

"If we're going to have a problem where she is concerned." I smirk as I lean into his ear, my eyes falling to his shoulder. "Tell me now. I'd rather get blood in this room than at my house."

Wicked steps backward, his dark brown eyes searching mine. He nudges his head out of the room. "Chat."

I bring up my fingers to stop the rest of the room. "Give us a second."

Once we're out in the foyer, Wicked turns to face me. "First of all, fuck you. I never do anything without a fucking reason, you know that, second of all, you're fucking blind when it comes to her. She is your blind spot. Anywhere she is, everywhere else, no longer exists Royce. It makes you fucking dumb. She makes you fucking dumb. I am here to make sure you're not always fucking dumb." I watch as his mouth moves and have to physically hold myself back from punching him square in the jaw.

"Not blind, brother, I'm fucking focused. You hang that girl over anything that you think I can't kill, fuck, or fight, and you can bet your bottom dollar that I will slaughter, wreck, and knock out. She isn't my blind spot." I chuckle, running my finger over my bottom lip. "She's the fucking switch to my rage. She is what makes me fucking crazy. She is what I *rip* for. So I'll ask you one more time, and brother or not, I will fucking murder you."

Wicked shakes his head, running his hands over the back of his neck while clenching his jaw. "Royce. I am not your enemy. You trust me. It's why you all let me into L'artisanant."

I pause and think over his words. Mainly truth. I do trust him. I trust him a lot. “Trust isn’t something that I can negotiate where Jade is concerned.”

“Damn.” Wicked’s brows shoot up in surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man not want, but need a girl so bad in my entire life.”

“You must be new here.” It was a joke, but it was mainly true. Though I have known Wicked for years, he has never witnessed how I am with Jade.

His hand comes to my shoulder. “Brother, trust me. Anything I do with her, or for her, is for your benefit.”

My eyes narrow. “Don’t go near her.”

“So, you want her?” he tests.

I chuckle arrogantly. “Motherfucker, you are asking the wrong questions.”

“Well, what am I supposed to ask?” If anyone else had said those words, I would have smacked the shit out of them, but it’s Wicked. I have to warm to him being around Jade.

“Not that.”

“Why?” he asks, and now I know he wants to get hit.

“Because there’s no do I want her or does she want me.” I drag a puff of my cigarette until smoke drifts out of my nostrils. “There’s just her and I and no one else.”

Wicked nods. “Noted. I won’t go near her like that, but I do want to find out what she’s hiding.”

He isn’t alone with that.

Later that night, after we rode back to my house and I made sure Jade was in bed—fucking asleep—I called church in my living room. I need to vent about what I found out tonight, and maybe while airing out the new facts, I piece some of the puzzle back together.

“Why don’t you just tie her to the bed, and either fuck her to tell you, or torture her?” Gypsy states.

He's young. I know that. I constantly have to fucking remind myself of this fact or I'd kill him and then have a problem with Lion. "Because that's not her."

Gypsy runs his fingers through his One Direction styled hair and shrugs. "Just a suggestion."

I shake my head. I'm proud of how much he's growing and adapting to the life he's surrounded by. He was shit out of luck the second he left Lion's ball sac, though.

Lion leans over, resting his elbows on his knees. "She needs to tell you who he is. There's a reason why he is bringing her to your sex club."

"Why you gotta say it like that?" I jest, winking at Lion. He's never seen the details of L'artisaniant that most see. With Lion, it's black and white. You either fuck or kill.

Lion chuckles low, running his hand over the thick stubble on his jaw. "Because that's what the fuck it is."

Kicking out my leg, I watch as Wicked grabs one of the kitchen chairs and swings it around to sit on it backward. "Whoever he is, she's protecting him for a reason." I'm still not sure how I feel about Wicked and his play with Jade. I know that I trust him and his intentions, but knowing that he has fucked her doesn't sit right with me.

In fact, it makes my fingers fucking itch to be around his throat. And hers.

"I don't doubt that," I say, flicking my lighter around my fingers. "She knows I'll fucking kill him."

"What'd you do when she was in high school with all her boyfriends then? Damn," Gypsy mutters. "Fuck, Sick, you're psycho over her."

Silence. "It's cute that you think I allowed that."

"Poor bitch," Gypsy jokes, shuffling in his seat.

Lion stands from the sofa. "Have you had any new videos sent to you?"

I grit my teeth, my blood dousing the flames that blaze in my chest. "Yes. There have been two."

Lion pulls his keys out of his pocket. "Keep an eye on the videos while trying to control your woman. You going to be good going on your run tomorrow or should I send someone else?"

I flip Lion off. "Fuck you. I'll be fine."

Lion chuckles as he makes his way to the front door. He casts me one last glance before stepping through the threshold with Gypsy, Wicked, and Slim behind him.

Lion pauses at the threshold. "I never asked you about how she came about being your sister."

"Hmmm," I answer. "Because I don't really tell anyone about it." I lean forward until my elbows are pressed into my thighs. "She was dropped on our doorstep."

Lion tilts his head, crossing his arms in front of himself. "You didn't go through an adoption process?"

"No. Well, after she was left there, Mom and Dad did what they needed to do to find her family, but there was no record for her. Because of Dad, he pulled some strings and managed to legally adopt her after a child abandonment issue was released."

"Does she know this?"

I lean back. "No, she thinks she was left at the orphanage and we went through the process that way."

"Something ain't right with that," Lion says through a frown. "Sit out the run. Try to get to the bottom of whatever is going on with her."

"Lion," I growl. He knows damn well how much this club means to me and how I have never allowed anything to come near my club or brothers. *Except you almost wanted to kill Wicked over Jade.*

He shakes his head, throwing up his hands. I know there's no getting through to the stubborn old bastard. "Sicko, take care of the girl. She's your family, which means she's our family. Shit is tight in the club right now. We haven't had a war on our hands in the past year. Do whatever it is that you need to do."

Flicking a toothpick around in my mouth, I grin at him. “I still want that run.”

“Fucking hell. Why?” Lion says, exasperated.

I take the toothpick out of my mouth and toss it onto the coffee table. “Because I have a lot of anger inside and it’s gotta come out one way or the other.”

“You wanna start a war?” Lion asks, one brow quirked.

“Nah, not this time.” I wink at him as he flips me off, slamming the door behind himself and then it’s just me.

And her.

In a house where we don’t have to be brother and sister.

Growling, I squeeze my eyes closed and try to cut out the memories of what she felt like wrapped around my cock that night. I should have picked up on it. Why the fuck didn’t I know it was her?

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Jade

Three a.m. The red numbers that flash on the bedside table peer back at me.

Swinging my legs over the bed, I run my fingers through my hair, pushing it out of the way. I freeze when I remember where I am.

Royce.

Black silk sheets, inky covers, and white pillows. There's a single art piece hanging on the wall, an empty canvas. White. Nothing painted on it. A large TV that takes up most of the wall hangs on the opposite side, with a chest of drawers below it.

Inhaling and exhaling, I try to pull myself together. Reaching for my phone on the bedside table, I flick through the home screen.

Nothing.

No missed calls, no text messages from James. The fact that he hasn't reached out to me sends fear rustling through me. Pushing off the bed, I make my way to the door, swinging it open and browse down the long hallway. There's a light that's on at the end, so I make my way toward it, the cold floor pressing against the soles of my feet. My heart

crackles in my chest, my stomach rolling with unease. I don't know what Royce is going to be like when I see him.

I take the two steps that lead down into the lounge and kitchen area, pausing when I find him lying back against the sofa, an arm thrown over his face and his head resting on the back of it. He's shirtless, with nothing but his jeans unbuttoned and hanging low on his hips, displaying his Calvin Klein briefs. It's the first time I feel like I can see all of his tattoos. They're mainly skulls and demonic faces of sorts, but with the numbers 2000 tattooed over his chest. My heart short circuits when I see the numbers—my numbers—the year I was born, painted into his skin with the same graffiti font he used to splash over Orson's rock when we were kids.

I make my way farther into the room, picking up the bottle of whiskey that's sitting on the coffee table and bringing the rim to my lips. I take a swig, running the palm of my hand down his shirt that I'm wearing. It has the words Wolf Pack MC on it, with their wolf emblem and California beneath that.

Placing the bottle back onto the table, I slide my thumb over my bottom lip, swiping away the excess liquid while taking him in again. His tight abs, the tattoos over his skin, his arms laced with muscles and bound by strength. He is everything bad. Everything that is wrong in the world comes in the package of Royce Kane, but he never opens that package near me.

Ever.

His knees are spread, his chest rising and falling in a soft rhythm. His lips are parted slightly, yet he looks peaceful. From what I can see. I know that he's angry at me over Wicked, and I know that if he ever found out about James, he would probably cast me to the side like a used toy, but for right now, I need him. I want him in every single way that he has starved me from over the years.

Placing my legs on the outside of his, I slowly lower myself down on top of him, and he instantly stills beneath me.

“Jade.”

I press my finger to his lips. *I need him.*

Bringing myself down to him, I run my tongue over the rim of his lips.

His arm drops away from his face and my heart falls out of my chest. He is so fucking beautiful. His hair is messy on the top of his head, his eyes firm on me. “Duchess, we’re supposed to be siblings...”

I roll my tongue over the cut line of his sharp jaw and over the tattoos that decorate it. “Mmm, but siblings don’t know what each other tastes like.”

His body goes still beneath me, and just when I think he’s going to throw me off him, his arm hooks around my lower back, holding me hostage. His other hand comes behind my neck, clenching me roughly. He pulls my face down to his and smirks over my lips. “There’s no going back after this.”

I gulp. “I know.” I lean in to kiss him when he pulls back and picks me up from under my arms as if I weigh nothing, placing me on top of the coffee table.

He spreads my knees wide, running his hands up my inner thighs. “Shirt looks good on you.”

I sigh. “Shut up and take it off.”

“Nah, I’m leaving that on for now.” His head disappears between my thighs and my fingers find his hair. I prop myself up on my elbows, watching as his traps flex with every movement. His hands wrap around each thigh and he pulls me farther into his mouth. My head flies back as his tongue flicks over my clit.

I grind against his mouth as his tongue stays in the same place, sloppily licking me everywhere while soaking up my release. He slides his finger inside, and then another. I’m so close to release. I can’t breathe fast enough to catch up. Just as I’m near, he unlatches and runs his tongue over

where my pussy meets my thighs. I yelp when his teeth sink into my skin, pushing at his shoulders. His mouth is back on me and his hands slipping under my ass, lifting me off the coffee table and standing to full height. I grip on to his hair as my thighs tighten around his neck.

“Royce, don’t drop me.”

He chuckles from between my thighs. “Not happening.” His mouth opens on my clit as he moves us back through the way I walked down and back into the room I woke up in. Throwing me onto the bed, he tilts his head, swiping his mouth with the cushion of his thumb while his other hand squeezes his bulging cock.

“Take it off.”

“What, this?” I ask innocently, batting my lashes while grabbing at his shirt.

His eyes narrow. “Now.”

I shrug off the shirt until I’m in nothing but my bra, crawling to the end of the bed. His eyes flash with heat, setting my cheeks on fire.

Tucking my finger into the waistband of his jeans, I pull him closer to me, as his fingers dive into my hair. “Duchess,” he says so simply, I almost wasn’t going to answer him.

“Mmm?” I peer up at him from beneath my lashes while tugging his jeans down past his cock. I need on it. My mouth waters from how much I need to taste him in my mouth. I need it. Him, this, whatever he gives me. It’s toxic, but I’d drown in his poison. He yanks my head backward by my hair and tilts his head. “Stand.”

I stumble to my feet, my lips curling between my teeth to stop my smirking. *Got him.*

“You think you’ve been fucked before, and that’s the problem.”

“How is that a problem?” I ask carefully, knowing that I’m balancing on his patience.

He grabs me by the back of my neck and shoves my face to his. "We're going to kill each other. You know that, right?"

"That's fine." I run the tip of my finger over the hard curve of his jaw. "Fuck me like you want to kill me."

His mouth curves in a sinister smirk. "Oh, but I do."

"You've fucked me before, Roy. You know how I like it."

He bites down on his lower lip. "Touché."

His other hand comes to the front of my throat. "One more thing. I have a kink for the color purple."

My brows furrow, and before I can connect the dots in my head, his grip around my throat tightens, cutting off any chance of me breathing. *Got it.* Loud and clear. He releases and I tuck my fingers beneath the waistband of his briefs, sinking to the ground while tugging them down with me until I'm face-to-face with his cock. The tight skin pulls around the tip where a silver ball sits on the head. Wetting my lips, I part them over his tip and roll my tongue underneath, sliding him deeper into my mouth.

"Fuck," he groans, and the handle he has on my hair tightens, his hips bucking forward. "Arch your back." I follow his instructions, and when he moans again, I take him in farther. Sliding out, I twirl my tongue over his piercing and suck him back into my mouth, bobbing my head. His hips buck forward, my scalp stinging from his pulling.

Holding me by the back of my neck, he pulls out and squeezes my cheeks, leaning down to run the tip of his nose over mine. "The second I knowingly put my cock inside of you, that's it. It's game over."

I nod, licking his precum off my lips. "Understood."

Leaning down, he bites my lower lip into his mouth before standing and flipping me over onto my stomach. I land on the bed in a thud before he's moving on top of me. "You're on the pill, I presume..."

I nod, whipping my hair over my shoulder. "Yep."

He stares at my body, a fist in his mouth. "Jesus fucking Christ." His eyes fly to mine. "How many men have you

fucked?"

"Royce..." I whine, rolling my eyes. "Not doing this right now."

"Answer," he urges, and when he hovers over the back of me, his head tilting as his hand trails down the top of my spine. "Maybe not now, but you will be doing it."

I'm almost certain I will not.

His teeth sink into the nape of my neck. "I'll just have to fuck you hard enough to engrave the hard edges of my cock deep inside your cunt."

His other hand comes to my hip and he raises me up until I'm on all fours, his hand at my hair and the other cupping my pussy from behind. His finger slides in and out, rolling around and spreading my wetness over my entrance. Being so exposed to Royce is enough to keep me wet for days, but he continues to torture me anyway. Finally, when I feel the tip of him brush over my entrance. He's thicker than I remember. Heavy and angry. He pushes inside of me and I fist the sheets with my fingers, screaming out through my raw vocal cords as he continues to fill me to the brink.

He releases my hair and grabs on to the back of my neck as he picks up the pace. With every thrust, I slam back into him. Relentless, that's how he fucks me. His hand tightens around the back of my neck as my pussy sings like a fucking siren for her release. He slows down the speed but intensifies the thrusting. Jolting me forward, he grinds into me as fire ripples through my veins and my muscles release the tension they've been holding on to. Wet cum drizzles down the inside of my thighs.

With sweaty hands, he pulls out of me and pushes me back down onto my back, my long dark hair sprawling out over his sheets. "Always knew you'd be beneath me one day..." He smirks, and I can't even smile, that's how exhausted I am.

He crawls over me, stretching my knees wide with his while his cock is at the entrance again. I search his eyes

that are right above me, and I have to fight the emotion that's roaring to the surface. Once he finds out the truth, he's going to hate me.

His hand comes to my throat as his lips fall to mine. Just as he slips back inside of me, he kisses me. Not hard, or fast, or rushed. His lips move in perfect synchrony, as if kissing is his art and I'm the student. Our lips don't break, and when he pulls out and slams back inside of me, I moan into his mouth as his fingers clench around my throat. And so it happens, the kissing, the slapping of sweaty bodies filling the room, the grunty groans, the slapping across my face, the smell of sex tainted in cigarette smoke. I've never felt so good while feeling so guilty at the same time. As if I know that this right here, with him inside of me is what home feels like, but the guilt that creeps into my bones reminds me that I'm not being honest with him. He has always protected me, and I know that the second he finds out that he failed in the worst way possible, he's going to carry the guilt. So for now, while I have him, I'm going to drown in his poison and pray for a quick death.

His hips grind into me as he continues to ride my body over and over. Every now and then his grip around my throat would tighten, until I feel like my head is the shape of a balloon, but then he'd release it, and bite, gnaw at my neck like a vampire, breaking the flesh on my neck until blood slides down the curves of my throat.

"Royce," I moan tirelessly, my thighs clenching around his waist. Our bodies are slick with moisture, my heart near flatlining.

His mouth is back on mine and I lose it, my insides turn to liquid fire, igniting my orgasm until I'm dripping down his cock and over my upper thigh in jolts of release.

He muffles his moans by biting down on my bottom lip as he pulses inside of me, his chest dropping down to mine.

Sedated, I wrap my arm around him as he slides off, tucking me into his chest.

He kisses my head. “You’re going to tell me who that man is, Duchess, and I’m going to make sure he knows exactly who he just fucked with.”

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Royce

I fucked up last night, let shit slip. My restraint when it comes to Jade is imaginary and having her walk her sexy little ass onto my lap was like hanging bait in front of a starved wolf. I'm obviously going to fucking snap. I was weak, but it wasn't wrong. It should be wrong, but when I've been fantasizing about having her under me for so long, having it finally happen only solidifies those same feelings.

Feelings I sure as fuck cannot afford to have in my life.

"I fucked up," I say to Wicked as soon as he pulls in behind me at the clubhouse.

"You fucked her again." It wasn't a question, it was a confirmation.

"Yeah, and what's worse?" I add, smirking at him while pushing my keys into my pocket. "Is that I'm not letting her leave now."

Wicked chuckles, shaking his head. "You're a dumb fuck. Been fussy with your pussy for years, never fucked the same bitch twice—with the exception of Bea—and now all of a sudden you're ready for a wifey."

I flip him off. "I didn't say that, I just mean she's fucking with my head. I always knew the potential she could have

with me, and it's partially why I vowed to myself when I was a kid that I'd never touch her. Fucking tempted too, damn, there were a few close calls when we were kids when I almost fucking threw it all in and was ready to pursue her like that, but—" I pause as we reach the edge of the steps, turning my head over my shoulder. "—but she's my fucking sister."

Wicked shrugs, jogging up the steps. "Well, it could be worse. She could be your blood relative."

We enter the crib and find Lion, Gypsy, and a few of the other brothers already there around the kitchen table. Lion narrows his eyes on me. "Can smell the pussy from here."

"Yeah? Been that long since Bonnie let you slide between her lips?"

"Fucker."

I blow a kiss at him while taking my place on his right. "Why's everyone so fucking serious?"

Lion shuffles in his seat. "Something has happened overnight, and I've been waiting for you to arrive before I filled everyone in."

Pulling out a cigarette, I bite it into my mouth while grabbing out my lighter. "I'm listening."

Lion cracks his neck. "The supplier that your old man was dealing with turned up dead on the cartel's front door."

I blow out a cloud of smoke. "Sounds like a mafia problem, not an MC problem."

"It's a you problem, which makes it an us problem." I pause, looking around the table and watching everyone's eyes zone in on me.

"How so?" I wait for the ball to drop.

Lion leans forward, a fucking sparkle in his eye that only ever comes when he knows murder is upon us. "Because he had been *ripped*."

I pause, slowly blowing out the cloud of smoke from between my lips.

"Well, it wasn't mine."

Lion clenches his jaw. “Sicko, it’s yours.”

“Nup.” I shake my head, flicking the ash off the tip of my smoke. “It wasn’t me. I haven’t shaved anyone since—” I pause, thinking over my last kill. “Since three weeks ago.”

Lion leans back in his chair, studying me curiously.

Gypsy runs his hands over his hair. “Then fuck, you have a copy.”

“This is a problem because the cartel thinks that you killed their man, and now we have a possible war on our hands.”

This is the first time I’ve ever had a copy, and that’s not because I think someone can’t copy me, but it’s because the art in how I leave my mark isn’t something that people generally want to do. Ever.

“Call a meeting with them.”

“Royce.” Lion drops my real name. “This is the fucking Columbian cartel. You ever seen *Scarface*? They don’t fuck around.”

I lean back in my chair, tossing up the options that we have, when his words stop me in my tracks. “Who the fuck did they kill? Usually the third party is a fucking Falcon.” Falcon is what some cartels—mainly Spanish—call their eyes and ears. The bum boys who do nothing but sniff ass and then run back to their Capos to let them know what they smelled.

Lion chuckles, running his withered hand over his scruffy beard. “It was a Capo.”

I grit my teeth, squeezing my eyes closed while trying to think over what this might mean not only for me, but for my club, and now that Jade is back in my life, I’m not willing to gamble on shit. Which is exactly why I never wanted her back in my life. She’s a walking target for anyone who has a beef with me.

“We need to talk some sense into Jorge Carlos. Someone is crossing both of us, and I’ll make sure he fucking knows it. Bring your sister in.”

“Fuck no!” I say, my voice veiled in irritation. There’s no way in fucking hell that I’m bringing her into this mess. “Why would I do that?”

“Into the clubhouse, you fuckwit. We’re going on lockdown until we have shit sorted with the cartel. Direct families only, you all know the drill.”

With a round of *“Run wild, Live Free,”* everyone spills out of the room, leaving Wicked, Lion, and I alone. Once their rowdy asses are out of earshot, I say, “She hasn’t given me a name.”

Lion docilely strokes his beard, the sound of his leather cut rustling with every movement. He leans forward, hands in front of him on the table. “Bring her in. We can work on that.”

I shake my head. “You stay out of that. I’ll get it, I’m just saying, something doesn’t add up.” Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I flick off a text to Slim and Fluffy, who are on babysitting duty right now, telling them to bring her in.

“You might not want to hear this, but I think this goes a lot deeper than her having a little boyfriend who has a fetish for group fucks in an upscale mansion.”

“Mmm,” I say, running my finger over my upper lip. “Maybe.”



Jade

Being with Royce always felt right, but I'm not naïve to think that I could be the one to capture him in any way other than between my legs, and aside from that, knowing that I haven't heard from James has instilled enough fear to make me distracted. He would have contacted me by now. He's planning something, and I know that I need to tell Royce about him and everything I know before he finds out through someone else—namely James. It could help him in some way, but my fear drowns out my logic. I can't seem to shake it off. The rejection, denial. What if he doesn't believe me, and I look like a nutcase? What if James manipulates everything and has me sent to a nuthouse. Honestly, I wouldn't put it past him.

We pull up to the clubhouse and this time it looks different. There are a couple kids running around, and women dressed in a way that they weren't the night I came here—both times. I clutch the duffel bag I packed up from my dorm, filled with anything I need to last me a week like Royce had apparently instructed via Slim and Fluffy.

"Jade, follow us," Fluffy demands, opening the car door. Fluffy is a big boy, but the smooth skin he wears on his face

tells me he can't be any older than early twenties.

"Fluff, she's here, we don't have to order her where to go. Mission is done, she's safe and back on home soil."

Fluffy punches him in the arm. "She isn't like the rest of them."

Slim glares at him from the passenger seat. Slim is the opposite to Fluffy. He's skinny, runty, and has purple rings permanently circled around his eyes. They seem like good friends, even though they remind me of Ren and Stimpy. "Obviously."

I roll my eyes, yanking my duffel bag over my shoulder and kicking the door closed, leaving them to argue in the car. Idiots.

Pulling out my phone while making my way to the house, I hit dial on Sloane. I feel bad that I haven't texted her since everything started hitting off with Royce. She doesn't answer, which probably only means that she's in the middle of a lecture. There's no joke that I'm either going to have to put my head down in my studies, or sit college out for the rest of the year before I fall too far behind.

My fingers fly over my keys as I type out a message.

Me: Sorry I haven't texted. I'm okay with Royce. Call when you're free. X

Pushing my phone back into my pocket, I hear Silver before I see her. She comes bouncing out the front door, wearing her hair out in wild locks. Her blue eyes crash into mine. "You're here, good! Lockdowns are the best!"

"Really?" I say, not quite believing her. I can't think of anything worse than being stuck in a house full of bikers for days on end.

Silver nods her head. "Yup! Come on, we can put your bag up in Sicko's room. You get to meet Kara and Boujee!"

We make our way through the main room and when we pass the kitchen area, I feel a hundred eyes on me. Turning around, I find Royce instantly.

He continues to glare at Lion, his jaw tense. Panic and paranoia settle within me, unmoving. *I need to tell him.* Not right now. Silver takes my hand and drags me toward the stairs.

"Just FYI, the girl that Sicko fucks around with is here," she announces as I follow her through Royce's bedroom door. "She's not exactly a club girl because she's technically family to one of the brothers, but I thought you should know."

"Bea?" I roll my eyes at the mention of Bea. I just didn't realize she was essentially family.

"Yup!" Silver says, turning to face me. "She's Karli's little sister, who is Justice's old lady."

"Old lady?" I ask, confused while putting my bag down onto the floor. I'm not familiar with terminology within an MC, and never watched an episode of *Sons of Anarchy* or *Mayans* either. My TV watching goes about as far as tragic cooking shows.

Silver tucks her unruly hair behind her ear, guiding me toward the bedroom. "Think of a wife, and then multiply that by one hundred. There can be multiple wives, but there will only ever be one old lady." It makes sense in a way that doesn't make sense. "Speaking of, Bea was adamant that she was going to be that person for Sicko. Not sure why or how she would think that considering he's been nothing but a cunt to her in the past." Silver takes a seat on the large double bed, bouncing softly on it as if testing the springs. "The only time Sicko is tolerant of her is when he's drinking, and even then it's slim. And aside from that," Silver says, leaning back on one elbow. "She's not the only one he fucks with." Her mouth stretches wide. "Oops. Sorry, I can shut up. You probably don't want to hear this."

I wave her off, pulling my leather jacket out of my bag. I was in a rush for time this morning so I threw on some black skinny jeans and a white Dolce & Gabbana crop. "No, this is

nothing new for me. Royce has always had an appetite for pussy.”

Silver’s mouth twitches, just as I shove my arms through the tight sockets of my leather. She burst out laughing, kicking off her shoes and curling her legs beneath her ass to sit on her feet. “I can’t even imagine Sicko without all the tattoos and badass reputation.”

“Oh,” I murmur, pulling out a chair that’s tucked beneath an old desk. “He had a reputation back then, but it was, I don’t know.” I look around the room, taking in the empty photograph frames and old whiskey bottles. There’s a large bed, a desk and a dresser, and a small boombox. If this is where Royce stays, he doesn’t stay here often. “He was just different.”

“Hmmm,” she teases. “Well, I’m glad that’s not awkward.” She pushes up the clear glasses that sit on the bridge of her nose before sliding her feet back into her shoes. “Come on. We’ll go help everyone in the kitchen. I can almost hear Mom yelling at me.”

The kitchen area of the house was filled with women by the time we got there. A couple I had met, some I hadn’t. Silver didn’t waste time introducing me to everyone, even rubbing it into Bea who I was with. Bea sat there glaring at me for the most part, her hands tucked in her jacket and her legs kicked out and crossed at the ankles.

Metallica is playing in the background now as Karli, Justice’s ‘old lady’ swings her hips side to side while stirring a mixture of salad leaves in a large brown bowl. There’s me, Silver, Bonnie, Karli, Bea, Kara—Roo’s old lady and former Miss Australia—Lilac, Justice and Karli’s four-year-old little girl, and Boujee, who is sitting on Silver’s lap. Music is playing, and a couple of the girls are laughing between each other, sharing a beer. They seem more like a family than any gang I’ve ever heard of. What I’ve witnessed with James is much, much worse than this. My heart swells in my chest,

filling empty parts inside of me with warmth. I can't deny the release of tension in my muscles from being around these people. Familiar. The walls that hold up this old house feel more like home to me than the multi-million-dollar mansion I grew up in. These women feel more like family to me than my own mother.

All I'm missing is Sloane.

With a flutter inside my gut, I pull out my phone from my pocket while taking a sip of my beer. **0 New Messages.**

What the fuck.

"Right, Jade?" Silver asks, her blues bright and wide, waiting for me to answer whatever it is she has just asked.

"What?" I put my phone onto the table, taking another swig of my beer. I'll call her after dinner. She should definitely answer then.

A snort comes out of someone from the other side of the table, and my head snaps to Bea who is staring daggers at me. "Like she would know."

Silver ignores her, and I'm starting to get the distinct feeling that Silver isn't too fond of Bea. Not sure why. But there's something there. "You know, the movie everyone is talking about right now with the hot guy in it. He's like, Spanish or something and oh—" She pauses, rolling her eyes back.

"I know what movie you're talking about." I smirk at Silver. "Where he takes her to his cabin in the woods?"

"How fucking hot is he!" Silver gasps, juggling Boujee on her knee.

"Ye—" A hand comes to the front of my throat from behind, and I'm momentarily in shock by the power convulsing against my back. My head is jerked back until I'm looking up at Royce from behind me, his brows raised.

"He's what, Duchess? Continue what you were gonna say and see what happens."

I'm still paralyzed from his blatant possessiveness, before I finally collect myself. He releases my neck and

takes the few steps to dive into the fridge that's in front of me, still scowling over his shoulder. I haven't spoken to him all day, since we fucked last night, and the first thing he does is manhandle me in front of all his friends—or family—or whatever they are to him.

He kicks the door closed, and just as he's about to walk past me, he leans down into my ear so only I can hear his next words. His lips graze my earlobe and my insides damn near catch on fire. "Say any other man is hot, and I'll shove my cock so far down your pretty little throat that you'll be eating through a straw for the next month." He catches my lobe between his teeth, leaning even closer into me. "The Royce you knew isn't the Royce that you're about to know. I'll fuck you within an inch of your life just to prove a point, Duchess." Then he leaves, with my cheeks flaming hot, my thighs clenched together, and a pool of moisture right between my legs.

Why am I the way I am?

I believe him. By God, I believe him. Which is most likely what is going to make this somewhat fun.

"Jesus," Silver grumbles, watching as Royce makes his way back outside where most of the men are. "He's even worse than I thought he was going to be."

Bea stands from her chair and hurries out the door in a wave of anger. I could literally feel her rage penetrate during her departure.

"She's either going to sulk or harass him."

I tune them out, trying to control my urge to go out and make sure she's not going to Royce. He's right. I don't know him anymore, and that's what makes me queasy. Had he and I started something back when we were young, I would have been able to architecturally build whatever connection we have, but I no longer understand the foundation. It makes me tense and uneasy, and on top of that, I'm holding on to a secret that could end both him and I and any chance

that we have. That pains me more than a dagger in the heart ever could.

"Silver," I say, just as Kara and Bonnie start hauling trays of food outside. It's still pretty early with the sun only just setting. "Do you have anything slightly stronger?"

"Like, vodka or tequila?"

I cringe. "How old are you?"

Silver cocks her head. "Seventeen."

Karli reenters through the front door. She has short brown hair and hazel eyes. There's a softness to her that I wouldn't have ever expected to find in a biker clubhouse.

Karli pauses, placing her hands on her wide hips. She has a figure that most would die for. The perfect splay of curves. "I know what you need, and that ain't it."

She takes my hand, pulling me up from my chair. I snatch my phone quickly, casting Silver a quick look before Karli leads me out the back door, where I was the second night I came to the clubhouse.

The door closes behind us and suddenly it's just her and I and the loud echoes of men and music playing on the other side of the house.

Karli turns to face me, her fingers diving into her back pocket. "Bea isn't that bad when you get to know her."

I shiver, running my hands up and down my arms as she flips open a little silver casing, taking out what I assume is a joint. I don't know how she knew this is what I needed, but she did. It is definitely something I need to just take my edge off. Karli places the end between her thin lips, lighting the tip.

"I'm not worried about Bea," I finally say.

She continues to warm up the spliff, sucking short tokes before handing it to me. Blowing out a thick cloud of gray smoke and filling the air with the sweet earthy scent of marijuana, she chuckles. "Oh, and you don't need to be, trust me. When I first met Justice, he had a club girl warming his cock. She refused to let him go, hung on to his

balls with her teeth.” I choke on the smoke, a laugh erupting from deep within my belly. Quickly handing the joint back to her while banging on my chest—and hoping I don’t fucking die from this lethal weed—I say, “Thanks for the visual. Really wasn’t needed.”

She ignores me, dropping down onto one of the steps. I follow, sitting on the one just above. I already feel the effects of the THC leisurely swimming its way through my blood, warming me from the inside and placing all of my troubles right into the trash. “Anyway, that girl, she was something I had to worry about. Had a lot of drama with that bitch.”

“What happened to her?” I ask as she passes me the joint.

Pause. “I killed her.”

I giggle slightly, taking another hit. I’ve been around a lot of darkness in my life, but not death. It’s hard to see someone like Karli be connected to an evil such as murder. “Well don’t worry. I’m not going to kill your sister.”

Karli laughs so hard her shoulders shake. “Listen, I wouldn’t blame you if you did. She seems to drip her thirst all over Sick, not that she’s the only one. There was a fight between her and Taylor, another club girl, over him. Bea won. She thought she was on top of it all until you came along.”

The joint is finished and when we both stand, Karli places my hand in hers. “It’s only a matter of time before you’ll be with all of us, wearing Sick’s patch over your back with pride, so that instantly makes you of higher rank than Bea. Sick is the VP, Lion’s pride and fucking joy.” She rolls her eyes, but it’s not out of hatred, more with jest. “All I ask is that you try to take her lightly.”

“Karli, I don’t—” I shake my head. “How can I explain this? Well, okay.” She waits for me to answer, and I slightly panic at the thought of telling this woman, who in essence is a total stranger, how I’ve always felt about Royce, and what

it has done to me over the years. Especially when we were kids. "I don't scare easily when it comes to Royce. My pain threshold is high where he is concerned. I had feelings for him as soon as I knew what feelings were, yet I still hung around him and his line of new girlfriends at school as if seeing another girl under his arm, in his bed, on his lap, didn't destroy me bit by bit. So, trust me, I'm not worried about Bea and I'm not a jealous person when it comes to it."

Karli's lips curl between her teeth as we both stand. "Ganja makes you real emotional, huh?"

I snort. "No." Turning around, I'm about to tell her that I just needed to get it out when Royce's glare pins me in my place. My heart sinks.

"Mmhmm," she whispers, smacking me on my ass. "Good thing, huh?" I gulp past the nerves that are clenched around my throat. *Damn it, Karli.*

As soon as she's out of sight and it's just him and I, he gapes at me. "You what?"

"What, what?" I blurt innocently, taking a wary step down, bringing me to where Karli was seated. I need a plan of escape. I may not know who this Royce is anymore, but the way he hunts is the same. I can see it in the way his eyes harden angrily, like carved stone.

He counters my step. "You fucking had feelings for me like that and never thought to say anything?"

"What do you mean, Roy! You know I did!" I'm almost certain he knew. "Or why else would you antagonize me every chance you damn well got!" Another step down.

Another forward. "Duchess, I'll give you a head start to run, in an attempt to have me calm my shit down, and after that, your ass is mine."

I spin around quickly, my legs jolting me forward as a rush of adrenaline pulses through me. Arms wrap around my waist, hauling me off the ground as I scream loudly, my hand covering my mouth. "Roy! Put me down!"

He doesn't. Not until he has taken a few more steps. When he finally does, I'm in direct view of everyone that's outside the clubhouse at the front near the fire pit. It's dark, with nothing but Royce's large body caging me in. The ripples of his muscles flex in his arms as he cages me in.

He cocks his head, his voice low enough to raise the dead. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," I say, and I don't know what lie I should bring up. He doesn't touch me, but his presence is enough to caress every single inch of my untamed soul. His eyes alone eat up the space between our bodies like a starved wolf, overdue for his feast.

"Because isn't enough."

"Would it matter?" I sigh, glaring up at him while leaning against the metal wall. I've come to gather we're inside of a small shed. It smells of motor oil and fresh grass clippings. There's no door, so if someone really wanted to, they could probably see us in between the lawnmower and garden tools.

"What do you mean?" he asks, and as soon as he begins running the tip of his finger down the front of my throat, I inhale a deep breath to contain the euphoria that crashes over me, ready to crush me into tiny little pieces.

"I mean, you would have still left..."

He snaps, pinning me to the wall by his hips, his hand coming back to the front of my throat. "Told you to shut the fuck up about that, Duchess."

"Well maybe!" I protest around the tightness of my throat. "I don't fucking want to!" His lips are on mine in a flash and sweltering magma rolls through my bloodstream, my legs wobbling beneath my weight. He picks me up from the backs of my thighs and wraps them around his waist while never breaking the kiss. Slamming me against the wall again in a crash, his mouth laps up every bit of flesh he can find. My hands are in his hair, around the back of his thick neck, and down to the front of his cut. I glide my fingers

over the patches on the front as he tears open my leather jacket and ducks beneath my crop, his head dipping lower until his mouth latches on to the nub of my breast. He tugs the sensitive bead beneath his teeth and a fierce sting aches through them.

He pauses, standing back to his full height. “Who the fuck let you have fake tits?”

Oh shit.

“Ah, Mom did.”

“What?” he snaps. “Why the fuck would she do that?”

I shrug. “I complained that mine were too small.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

Wrapping my fingers around the collar of his cut, I pull him in closer. “Just fuck me.”

Just like that, with those simple words, he’s unbuttoning my jeans, his hand diving beneath. As soon as I feel his palm over my bare pussy, I moan, my head tipping back. His thumb presses against my clit in slow circles as he rests his head in the crook of my neck. “Do you know how much I want to fucking kill you right now? All these years I could have had my mouth on this pussy, and you deprived me of that.” He increases pressure, his circles slowing. “I’m going to fuck you hard and fast here, and then later, you’re going to wish I was still fucking you how I’m about to.”

I nibble on my bottom lip as he slides his finger inside of my entrance. “I need you inside of me.”

“Say it again...” he growls through a throaty groan.

“I need you inside of me.”

He withdraws his hand from my pants and drops me back to the ground, tugging my jeans down to my ankles and tearing them off. If I wasn’t high and nervous, I would make sure no one was watching us right now, but I don’t. I don’t care. All I care about is that I have him and he has me, and I need to be closer to him. I need to feel him inside of me, owning me, thrusting into me, riding and licking me all over my body. The cold brush of wind whisks over my clit as

Royce unbuckles his belt and picks me back up with his fingers flexing around my thighs.

His mouth is on mine again, his slick tongue sliding between my lips. I fight the urge to scream, my body responding to all of his physical cues, as if it knows how to counter his actions.

Slamming me against the wall roughly, he thrusts inside of me, his mouth on mine again. My body fills with hot fire with every single thrust. Every time he rocks inside of me, my pussy clenches around his thick shaft, milking his every movement.

Pulling out, he flips me over and slaps my ass hard, entering me from behind with a force of energy. My hair rolls over one shoulder as I catch where everyone is seated. In my sex and *very fucking high* haze, I'm somewhat pleased to see no one watching, until my focus falls on Wicked. He's leaning back in his chair, a toothpick rolling around between his swollen lips. His eyes are dead, cold, and emotionless. Royce grabs my hair tight and yanks my head backward.

"You better not be looking at who I think you're looking at..."

I gulp, no desire to answer him.

He releases my hair before one hand clamps around my waist, tensing hard enough to leave bruises beneath my skin while his other comes to the back of my throat. "You'll pay for that too."

He squeezes and thrashes me from behind, his cock thrusting against the walls of my pussy as his hand tenses enough to cut off any form of oxygen.

I tap at his hand as he relentlessly thrusts into me. In and out, in and out, his hand clenching the same time, with every time he chokes me, it seems to get longer. Bright retro dots dance behind the backs of my eyes, everything turning dizzy. Just as my thighs clench together and a moan falls from my mouth, my orgasm drips out of me and slips down my thigh as everything goes black.

Dirt and chalk crusts around my mouth as I come to, with Royce placing me back onto the ground in the back of the small garage, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Roy!" I gasp. "What happened?"

"You may have closed your eyes or somethin'..."

"Yeah," I growl. "Or something... or I *fucking passed out*."

He tosses my jeans and panties at me and I slip into them, careful not to stand too quickly. "Was it after I came at least?"

"Yes." He's still laughing as he grabs a cigarette from his packet.

"Stop laughing!" I scold him, though I have to fight my own smile.

He snorts. "Never." Lighting up the end, he places the tip into his mouth and tucks me under his arm. Just as he's about to lead us out of the shed, his fingers hook in mine and he spins me around until I crash into his hard chest. "One more thing."

I peer up at him, hypnotized by the way his thick eyelashes fan out over his tanned skin. "What?"

Smoke releases from between his puffy lips. "Whatever is going on with you and that fuckboy, I need to know about. This is serious, Jade. It goes deeper than me being a possessive control freak over you, you hear?"

My smile falls, and when his fingers flex around my chin, tilting my face up to his, I know he caught it.

"Duchess, what's going on?"

My mouth opens, and I know the words are near falling out. *So close*. But then shame slams its ugly hand over my mouth and I swallow the potential rejection like top-shelf alcohol. How am I going to tell him? How do I tell him? Where do I start? "It's a really long story, but I will tell you."

His brows furrow in, worry lines etching into his smooth forehead. He sighs, relaxing his grip. "Later."

I nod, offering a small, fake smile. “Sure, later.” When he tucks me under his arm and directs me to where everyone is seated, I ignore the pang of loss that throbs in my chest.

Even when he flips off a few of the brothers for whistling at us and I see a smidge of the old Royce, that same pain throbs.

Even when I take a seat on his lap at the table and he hands me a plate filled with fatty meats and crispy fried potatoes, that pain intensifies. When I look down at him from above and see the way his eyes light up on me, his arm relaxed around my waist as it should have always been, that. Pain. Fucking. Throbs. As I hunt around the table and watch everyone in their movements with their loved ones, and how they all shuffle in their seat, talking and laughing among one another, the pain *throbs*. This isn’t just a motorcycle club, it’s a family. No wonder Royce never wanted to come home after he found them, I wouldn’t want to either. I’ve never felt so safe, or so right, than I do while I’m here, on this infuriatingly crazy man, sitting at this over-the-top long table and eating this deliciously cooked food. Sadness washes over me when I realize this is all a dream. Soon, I’ll have to wake and the nightmare that’s my reality will be waiting for me on the other side.

“You good?” Royce asks, biting the side of my neck.

I sink my teeth into the fatty meat, sucking the juices off my thumb and looking down at him. The way he takes me in is strong enough to cripple me. He cripples me. Every single emotion that I felt as a kid has returned tenfold. “So good.”

Slowly, the corner of his mouth kicks up in a sexy smirk. “So good, huh?” He leans over and wraps his lips around the thumb I just sucked, but instead of sucking on it, he bites it. Hard.

I yelp, but no one hears because everyone is talking and laughing loudly. “Ouch, Royce!”

He chuckles, his soft lips crashing onto mine briefly. “Yeah,” he says, licking his lips. “I’m never letting you out of

my sight ever again." My heart explodes in my chest, the shards of the aftermath ricocheting through my flesh. As soon as it exploded, the logicality of my situation makes my head spin and stomach sink. I twist around to block my face from crumbling. Tears well at the back of my eyes as I internally count down from twenty. Breathing in and breathing out. Every second I spend with him only lathers my pain with guilt. So much guilt.

How the hell am I going to get through lockdown?

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Royce

I left Jade out the back with the girls while Lion called church after the feast. We touched base, he told everyone that he hadn't heard back from the cartel, and now everyone is leaving, retreating to their bedrooms or to their tents out back. Lockdowns are always inconvenient for routines, but they're necessary. They're what keep us safe.

"Remember the day we met?" Lion asks, sucking on his cigar.

I chuckle. "Yes, I fucking do..."

Four Years Earlier

I pulled my car up to the parking lot of Patches, the rumble of my V8 growling angrily beneath my ass. "It's a shit hole, for one," I murmured to myself. Bitch probably set me up.

Picking up my phone, I sent off a message to Orson and Storm, pausing over their names briefly. What we had gone through yesterday was enough to drive a wedge through any friendship, but our friendship wasn't any friendship. One

day, we would turn what we went through into something good. That I fuckin' know.

If I die, Patches is the bar I'm at.

I pushed my phone back into my jeans pocket and threw my hoodie over my head, climbing out of the car. It had an old-style house vibe to it, with a worn porch and aged wood lining the entry. The words Patches is inscribed over the chipping paint job, the log door swinging open with the wind. Taking the steps needed to the entrance, I pushed open the door with a squeak and it slammed shut behind me.

The temperature in the room is noticeably cooler than outside, and that's not from the weather. The room is split between two groups.

On one side was a pack of bikers, wearing thick, heavy cuts and all of various shapes and sizes, and on the other side, standing somewhat calm and chill, was a group of older men dressed in suits and dripping with gold. I feel like I just strolled into an episode of The Sopranos crossed with Sons of Anarchy.

"Ah..." I said, but it was too late, gunshots rang out. I instantly ducked behind a table to take cover. "Fuck!" I was probably about to die, all because I listened to some random ass lady that told me to go to a fucking bar in the ass crack of nowhere. Bullets sprayed everywhere, smashing glasses and bottles. When everything died out, I tipped my head around the corner to see the older man from the MC side on his knees, his hands up behind the back of his head and the mafia boss and his side all pinned on the MC.

Shit.

Pulling my Glock out from the waistband of my pants, I pointed my pistol at the man who looked more important, since he was the one who had a gun pointed at the older man on the ground.

"I told you to stay out of my business, Lion."

Pop!

I squeezed the trigger and he dropped to the ground after my bullet penetrated the side of his head. I hadn't killed a man before. This was my first time, but something inside of me knew that I needed to save this man today—at any cost. The MC side all whipped out their guns, shooting down the other two men who were with the mafia boss. I stepped closer to the bodies, studying them charily, wishing I could do something. Anything.

"What you thinkin', son?" the older man, Lion, asks, his attention unrestrainedly on me.

I shrugged. "Just that if these are bad people and if you could, would you want to do more to them?" My eyes found his. "I mean, death is the coward's way out. The fun should start before they're dead. Humiliate them. Show them they have no control, not anymore." The anger I felt inside of me was tipping over the edge of my control, and I didn't like it. But seeing blood, and bodies on the ground, made me think of Diamond, and how much I would fucking kill to have his mercy pressed to the tip of my gut.

Lion flashed me a prideful grin, displaying his gold tooth. "Mmmm, where did you say you were headed?"

Present

"Yeah, I remember like it was fucking yesterday." I chuckle, shaking out of my memory. "We burned that whole fucking place to the ground."

"Which was hard to do, considering that bar had sentimental value to this club."

That catches me off guard, and I guess that should have been something I asked him a long time ago, but it slipped my mind among all the bodies, blood, and being patched in instantly.

I lean back in my chair, stretching my legs wide. I'm trying to force my thoughts from drifting to Jade asleep upstairs, in my sheets. My cock swells against the zipper of my jeans at the fucking thought of it. "You gonna tell me about that..."

Lion clears his throat, taking a cigar out of his humidor and putting it between his cracked lips. Age hasn't been kind to the old fucker, but he was definitely a handsome cunt in his better days. "There was a girl."

We both look at each other and laugh. "Isn't there always."

Lion lights the trunk of his cigar. "This one was different." I never asked him why Bonnie was only his wife and not his old lady. I never asked him about a lot of shit when I think back on it, but the thing with Lion is that if you were to know something about him, you would know because he would tell you. Digging into his life would do nothing but piss him off, and you don't wanna be pissing him off. Age isn't the only thing that hasn't been kind to him, his patience hasn't either. "She was my old lady."

I pause, my fingers tensing around my chair. Without filling the silence with unnecessary shit, I keep quiet, waiting for him to continue. He does. "Met her when we were in our early twenties. She was this mysterious witch that I fell in love with instantly. My old man and president at the time warned me off her. His words were... *Stay away from girls with dark hair and bright eyes. Their soul will always battle between good and bad.*" He shakes his head, running his withered hands over his face, his gold rings clinking. "Should have fucking listened. I didn't. Fell in love. She ran away from her messed-up family to be with me here, and then one day, she just—" He stops breathing. "Vanishes. Tried waiting for her for years, but she never came back. That day I met you, I had just found out that her family had close fucking ties to the Colombian cartel, and I

was ass-deep in trying to find her. Dead ends. Every fucking time.”

He flicks off the ash of his cigar and leans back in his chair, the wood cracking under his weight. He takes a long pull, rolling the brown trunk around in his mouth. “Gave up, found Bonnie and had that little shit Gypsy. Told her she’d never be my old lady, already had one of those.”

It’s true, we only give the honor to one woman, and by the sound of it, she was that for Lion. Even as he speaks about her, I see the clear pain in his eyes, the twitch in his fingers around his cigar from anger, and finally the brittle tone he uses when speaking about her. Every now and then, he’d gaze off into the distance, as if reliving a memory. Or a nightmare. Can’t figure out which is what.

“I’m sorry, big man,” I murmur roughly, taking out a rolled spliff from my pocket. “Did you ever find her?” By this point, I’m completely engrossed in this asshole’s love story gone wrong. Sounds like some modern-day twist on Romeo and Juliet.

His head tips back as a laugh rips from his throat. “Fuck no. Bitch would be locked in my room for days on end if I had.”

“And what if you do find her one day?” I ask the question that I’m sure he never wants to answer. “Do you know who you’d choose?”

His eyes come to mine, and for the first time since I’ve met Lion, the muscles in his face stiffen somberly. There’s not a hint of a smile. He is deafeningly dangerous in this moment. “Every fucking time.”



Jade

His hands wrap around my hair, tugging on it roughly as his lips find the connection between my neck and my shoulder. “You’re owed a fucking beating, Duchess.” I curl my lips between my teeth, pressing my ass into him as his thickness slides down the crack of my ass.

Reaching back until my fingers find the smooth skin of his dick, I wrap my fingers around his girth and tug languidly, resting my head on his chest.

His penetrating snicker rocks me as he buries his face into my hair. “Nuh uh...” He whacks my hand away from him and I fucking pout, even though I know that he can’t see me. Tearing off the blankets from our bodies, even though we’re drowning in complete darkness—with the exception of a small crack in the curtain that the full moon is fighting through—he presses me down onto my stomach with his hand at my lower back. In slow circles, he caresses my ass, until both of his hands cup one cheek.

“Royce.” I wriggle beneath his hand.

With a loud clap, his palm comes down sharply on my left cheek and I flinch with the sting of pain. My blood heats to

my cheeks and my thighs twitch together. “No talking, or I’ll gag you.”

I flick my hair over one shoulder and peer at him over the top. I’m blinded by the blanket of the night, but the outline of his muscled shadow gives me enough clue as to where he is over my body. Ready to take what he wants. *What he owns.* I’m completely at his mercy, only our bodies already know that. They recognize each other.

“But—” His hand dives onto the ground where his Wolf Pack MC bandana is and snaps it near my face, bringing it to my mouth.

“Bite, you’re fucking good at that.” My teeth clench down over the material that’s in my mouth, the tang of cologne and cigarette dancing across my tongue. He ties it roughly around the back of my head. “Wicked turns you on?”

I’m stunned by his question, so my answer sticks to the back of my throat.

Lifting me by my hips until I’m up on all fours, he stretches my legs wide, pressing my face down onto the bed. *Slap.* Pain radiates over the entrance of my pussy. “Answer the question, Jade. Does he?”

Saliva builds around the edges of my mouth, my brows knitting together in confusion. *What the fuck is he doing?* He can’t be serious right now.

I shake my head to answer his question.

Slap!

Another sting pelts across the bottom on my vagina, only this time it verges close to the entrance of my asshole. I weep out loudly from the pain. His other hand comes to the back of my neck as he presses me farther into the blankets.

“Cross your fingers together at the back of your head.”

Oh god. I do as I’m told, mainly because I don’t think I want to fuck with this side of him, but another part of me wants to see just how far I can push him. He flicks on the bedside lamp, but it’s dim. Too dim. Offering a soft sepia shade to the room.

"You let go, and you feel this?" Cold metal slides down the crack of my ass and I tense. My muscles cease when I mentally put the picture together of what it is. He continues to slide the blunt side of a knife down my ass crack. Flattening the knife so it's covering my pussy and my ass, he leans over until his mouth is at the back of my ear. "It's going to be one of the many ways I show you just how much you don't know me anymore." He removes the knife and I feel the tip of his cock press against my entrance. "And another thing? You don't come unless I say you can."

I wriggle beneath his grip before swallowing him whole. The headboard of the bed crashes against the wall as I glare at him over my shoulder, his eyes on mine. He grins, bringing his hand to his mouth and I watch in fascination as his tongue sneaks out and he licks the palm of his hand, sliding it over my asshole. He continues to pump inside of me in savage thrusts, until I feel his balls slap against my clit and beads of sweat swell over my brow line. He slips his finger into my ass as his cock continues to drive inside of me. My clit throbbing every time I feel the tip of him connect with my cervix. My arms ache from holding on, my knees shaking from holding up my weight. My body is confused with the range of feelings that are speeding around inside of me. With the stabbing of pain that echoes through me at every second pump, comes a wave of pleasure. I want to scream when my body tightens and my muscles tense, wailing quietly while my orgasm holds me hostage, waiting for that final push to shove me over the edge.

He stops and tears prick the corner of my eyes, sweat pooling beneath my face and soaking into the mattress before he pushes inside me roughly, forcefully. Controlled. When his pace slows, his mouth comes to the nape of my neck as his sharp teeth sink into my skin.

"Show me how much you're mine, Duchess..."

With those words spoken through rough baritone and raw animalistic groans, I lose it. My heart rate breaks the scale, my blood turns to lava and everything south quivers as fluid gushes out of me and my body collapses beneath his grip, unable to hold itself up after the torture it's endured.

He must pull out because hot cum shoots up my back in spurts, as he slowly releases the knot around the back of my head. Running his finger through his warm liquid, he brings the same fingers to my mouth. "Remember this taste next time you find yourself looking at Wicked with those pretty little eyes. What's it taste like, Duchess?"

I'm still panting, struggling to come to terms with everything my body is trying to deal with. "Cum."

His dark chuckle is like ice slipping down the curves of my spine. "Wrong. It's the taste of a man who will kill anyone who crosses his path during his hunt of catching you." He finally releases me, snatching the bandana off the side of the bed after he has wiped me clean. "Come here."

With a wince of pain in my arms, legs, and now swollen pussy, I turn toward him, finding peace in the arms of a man who causes so much chaos.

I run the tip of my finger over the indented lines of his abs and the thick lines of his tattoos, or more obviously, the numbers 2000. "I don't think anyone will walk that path, Roy."

"Hmmm?" he asks, his voice drunk with sleep. I've realized sleepy Royce is my favorite Royce, as the tip of his finger runs circles on my arm.

"No one will take that path."

"Why's that?" he asks sleepily, his lips now relaxed against my forehead.

"Because one look at both of us and people know it's only supposed to be us on that road."

His finger stops moving before his lips cushion against my forehead, setting a fucking army of butterflies soaring in my belly. "Sleep, Duchess."

“Because tomorrow’s not guaranteed?” I joke, my eyelids heavy.

“Every single day that I’m breathing means your days are guaranteed. Sleep.”

My eyes close with a smile stretched wide on my face. I won’t let him go without a fight, I know that much. But what if the fight is with him?

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Royce

She makes me vulnerable. I know that. I was aware of the effect she would have on me since the day I first saw her as a baby, but now, this, the growing fear that I have buried in my gut, it's all only intensifying.

"Did you get any new information out of her?" Lion asks from under his bike, tinkering with metal. I don't know why the stubborn fuck is working on his motor when we have a potential war on our hands. Shit between us and the cartel has been rocky since I joined the MC—since that day at Patches. Yet after we killed the three of them, Lion settled with the cartel. I sense there's shit he keeps up his sleeve where the cartel is concerned, and now that I know about his old lady, I'm guessing it has something to do with her.

I blow out the thick poisonous smoke. "No. I'm going to tonight."

Lion rolls out from beneath the hanging metal, glaring at me. "Stop thinking with your cock."

My head jerks back as a snort leaves my mouth. "You're one to fucking talk." I want to throw the whole cartel thing in his face, but it is still me they think killed one of their bosses.

Lion stands, swiping his hands with a cloth. “Fuck you.”

I blow him a kiss just as Bonnie waltzes out holding a case of muffins. “I made orange chocolate chip, since they’re Jade’s favorite,” she says to me with a slightly aggressive smile. Jesus fucking Christ, are they talking shit about me already?

“Thanks—”

Pop! Pop! Pop! Bullets spray out everywhere as her smile falls, the color draining from her eyes. Everything seems to move in slow motion as Lion lunges forward, catching Bonnie in his arms. Blood seeps through the front of her white blouse as she collapses in Lion’s arms.

I spin around in a rush, my instincts kicking in as I reach for the gat that’s strapped around my waist. Raising it up, I pull the trigger.

Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

My feet pick up in a run as I jolt to the front gate. My vision turns bleak. I want blood. I need blood. Nothing else matters to me but catching whoever the fuck was behind that gun.

Until I feel her energy pulsing at my back. Her fear violently seeks comfort within me, and I spin around to find Jade curled beside Bonnie on the ground. Lion pulls his AK from beneath the garage door.

“Jade!” I roar so loud that my throat contracts in pain. “Get the fuck inside now!” I point to the doors, but the little bitch shakes her head, grabbing Bonnie from beneath her arms and dragging her to shelter.

I’m going to fucking kill her.

Spinning around just as Slim kicks open the gates, we follow out onto the road as a black Range Rover speeds off and disappears around the corner.

Lowering my gun, I draw my tongue out to my lips as the strong taste of metal strips the hairs on the back of my

throat.

"Lion," I croak, stepping forward. "She might need you right now."

A look of anguish flashes over his face. "Can't lose her."

I point to the car that disappeared, but Fluffy and Wicked roar past us on their bikes. "I'll catch up!" I yell out at them before looking back to Lion. "They fucked us on our turf, now they're all going to fucking die. Go in there and handle your woman, and fucking mine while you're at it," I say flatly, heading straight for my bike. I take one more look at Jade as blood splatters out of Bonnie's mouth, seeping through Jade's fingers.

Jade's eyes lock with mine. Worry, pain, loss.

I'm so fucking angry at her I can't see straight. Not even with Bonnie taking her last breaths on the ground.

I kick up my bike and ride out of there in a roll of thunder, knowing that when I get back, we will be down a family member.

Catching up to Fluff and Slim, we swerve in and out of busy streets, hunting for the Rover. I see the tail ass end of the blacked-out SUV a few cars up, turning slightly to signal for Wicked to go around the back street. They fucked us in our home, but they fucked up when they tried to get away with it on our fucking streets. People move around us here. We *own* this fucking town because for generations we are the ones who have protected it.

Wicked veers off to the right with a song of honks and blaring in the distance, as Fluff sticks to the middle. I pull to the left and gun it forward even more, the metal of my nine hot against my hip. The Rover swerves out to the left, heading toward a boatyard, which works perfect because there's no one fucking around there.

Our bikes roll up as two fuckers slide out from the driver's and passenger's seat and make a run for the dock, where an awaiting boat was with another man behind the

wheel. I raise up my gun after jumping off my bike, aiming it straight at the driver and pulling the trigger. With the first pop, blood splatters from the back of his head as his lifeless corpse falls to the ground.

The other two fucks still make a run for the boat as I bolt forward.

My boots slap against the wood when I dive and jump on the slightly heavier fuck from behind, his body falling to the deck. Wicked keeps running, attempting to catch the other and stop the boat from setting off when he just slips past him, jumping onto the boat and replacing the man I shot behind the wheel, pulling away from the dock.

“Fuck!” Wicked yells, his wild eyes flying around the place to find something he can chase the boat with.

“Let up,” I say. “We got all we need.”

Wicked’s silver orbs turn to slate as they zone in on the slob-cunt-fuck that’s beneath my body. “Lion isn’t going to think clearly. He’s going to go in with rage and could ruin it all.”

The man beneath me twists and turns, as I press my knee into his lower back farther. “I won’t say shit! Not ever!”

Rolling saliva in my mouth, I spit in his mouth. “Shut the fuck up.”

Fluff whistles from the parking lot, hiking his thumb over his shoulder as Justice jumps out of the driver’s seat. His brown eyes sorrowfully fall to the ground, his shoulders slouching. I hear what he’s telling me.

Bonnie is gone.

Rage and anger bubble to the surface as I dive my fingers into the man’s mouth, stretching it wide. He glares at me with big eyes. “You’re coming with me, and when I’m done, you’re going to wish I killed you on the spot like I did your friend.”

Dragging his heavy ass to the back of the blacked-out van, we slam the back doors closed. I stop Wicked before he

leaves on his bike, with Fluff and Justice standing around behind me.

“We can’t take him back to the clubhouse. I don’t want him anywhere near Jade, and fucking also, Lion isn’t going to be thinking clearly. He won’t want him there, tainting Bonnie’s home.” Both Justice and Fluff agree, and when I look back at Wicked to see his decision, he nods.

“Agreed, but he will want in.”

“I know,” I say, reaching over to my bike and grabbing my helmet. “He can once we’ve gotten what we need. The kill will be his.”

I tell Justice to take him to the basement of one of the clubs that the MC owns. It would be risky if we didn’t have confidence in our cleanup crew. Swinging my leg onto my bike, I nod my head at Wicked to gesture to follow me.

This is going to get messy. I’m fucking on it.

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Jade

Candy apples. I remember loving them as a small kid. Royce, Orson, and Storm would drag me to the fair every year, and every year that they would visit Stone View I would beg for a candied apple. Something about the way the sticky red toffee would tickle my tongue. Sugar, the first drug we craved.

I look down at the gummy red liquid over my hands and clothes, stretching my fingers wide until they're no longer stuck together. "I'm sorry."

Lion is curled over Bonnie's lifeless body, her eyes now closed but the blood still seeping through her white blouse. Fresh. She was alive moments ago, and now she's gone. "*I love that top, Bonnie! Where'd you get it?*" Hard to believe that I asked her that question thirty-minutes ago as she was pulling the muffins from the oven. The muffins that are sprayed around her body, soggy with blood.

"Don't be sorry." Lion's voice cracks and I swipe my stray hair away from my face. "You need to go inside, Jade. Royce won't want you out here, and we've got to carry out a process that you might not want to see."

My lip trembles as sorrow sucks me in like a whirlpool in the middle of a calm ocean. Silently and carefully pulling me under. "Okay." Standing, my legs liquify and I began falling, just as Slim comes up behind me, catching me by my back.

"You'll make a good doc one day, Jade. Stick to your studies." Lion's comment throws me off, in the midst of everything, but when I look back down at him clutching Bonnie in his arms with his eyes pained and trained on me, I see why he says it. Maybe I could have saved her, had I known what I was about to learn. He's right. This is all wrong. I never want to feel like I maybe could have saved someone had I known what to do.

I promise myself and Bonnie that I will graduate medical school. I will do it for her.

Once we're back in the house, Slim leads me up the stairs as police cars roll in through the gates. Gypsy is quiet in the corner of the kitchen, his head hanging between his arms, resting on his knees. My heart contracts seeing him so young and losing a parent. I could have only wished that I had a parent even close to as warm and loving as Bonnie was. I whimper, my lip trembling. I want to wrap my arms around him and take his pain away.

The front door slams closed, the silence inside the house deafening.

"I'll head up for a shower." I push past Slim and ignore the girls who are on the sofas in the sitting room, soft cries and hushed whispers.

Once I'm in the safety of Royce's bedroom, everything seems to come crashing over me at once. It's as if I mentally know that I'm safe and stable, and now I can crumble with Royce around me. Running for the small toilet and shower area, I kick open the bowl and bend over, spilling out my breakfast from this morning. Muffins. Orange chocolate chip. Pain grapples with sorrow, fresh tears springing from my eyes. My shoulders curl over, my chest caving in. I clutch the porcelain of the toilet, releasing angry

wails between hiccups. I didn't know Bonnie for long, but she welcomed me into this family and made me feel like I was important. The world needed more of her, not one less of her. I will forever hold a piece of her within me.

I tap the lever and watch as all the murky, orange goo gets washed up and sucked through the bowl before coming to a stand and removing my clothes.

The shower was rough. I cried a lot while scrubbing off the blood and washing the taint of death from myself. After changing into some fresh gray yoga pants and a white crop top, I slip on some socks and bag my bloody clothes, the smell of what just happened laced within the stitches of my favorite pair of jeans. Snatching up my phone after brushing my long hair and twisting it into a topknot, I push open the door and freeze when I see Bea on the other side, glaring at me with red-rimmed eyes. Her white skirt is short, her fishnet tights ripped in various places. Her mascara bleeds down her flawless cheeks as her platinum blonde hair hangs like daggers down her back.

"Why didn't you save her?"

I squeeze the bag in my hand, knocked off my feet at her question. "I tried."

She takes another step closer to me, and just when I think she's going to say something hurtful, or maybe even hit me, her shoulders sag in defeat. "I'm sorry." Her eyes fly over my shoulder, landing on Royce's room. A different kind of pain flashes over her face before she comes back to me. "He's going to make you his."

"What?" I snap, almost angry that she's bringing this up right now. Like she really wants to go down that road after Bonnie just died in my fucking arms. I want to rip out her fake hair and sink my fingernails into her eyeballs.

"I've seen how he is with you. Different. He moves like a possessive animal anytime you're near. He shared me out, but I can't see him doing that with you."

I run the palm of my hand over my cheek to stop me from balling it into a fist and accidentally hitting her. “Why are you telling me this and right now, of all times?”

Her blues come down to me, because I’m a whole few inches shorter than her.

“Because I don’t think you deserve him. I see it in your eyes. The deceit, the secrets you’re holding from him. That man would tear the flesh off of people just to ensure your safety, yet you—” She pauses, and my fingers twitch into the palm of my hand. “You can’t even be honest.” She spins around before I can hit her and disappears through another door, slamming it closed. That bitch doesn’t know a fucking thing about Royce and me, and I don’t have to explain it to anyone.

But is she right?

With new worries now fresh in my mind, I make my way back downstairs and to the kitchen, where Slim is seated with Roo. Movement interrupts me through the crack in the curtain and I watch the police tape the scene, with Lion and Gypsy still outside.

“The police?” I don’t know why, but it’s the first thing that I think about. It strikes me as odd that outlaws would have the cops at their pad.

Roo swipes his thick thumb over his mug, nodding his head. “Yeah, they’re all in our pocket, with the exception of the little fucking redhead that keeps looking into the kitchen. There was history with her and one of our other brothers from another chapter. That tight ass doesn’t just have beef with us, she has a whole fucking butchery.”

I ignore his comment, just as Slim points to the plastic bag I’m holding. “Clothes?” He stands from the table and takes it from me. “I’ll get rid of it.”

“Thank you,” I murmur just as my phone vibrates in the waistband of my pants.

(image)

Now it's your turn to play. Be out the front in four minutes and bring nothing.

The blood drains from my face, my knees turning to Jell-O.

"Wow, you alright?" Roo asks, watching me before looking down to my phone.

I clutch it to my chest. "Yes. Ah, I'm just—I need a minute." I rush back upstairs and yank on my Vans, jogging back down the stairs.

"Jade, just stay inside, babe," I hear someone say, but I ignore them.

I ignore every single person who tries to stop me from leaving this house.

I ignore the stares from the officers who are looking at me strangely as I pass them.

And I ignore the calls of Lion as I pick up to a jog, bolting out the gate. I see nothing but my best friend, my sister in harm. They probably all think that I've lost my mind after what happened with Bonnie, which is partially true, but nothing, and I mean nothing, would have prepared me for the photo I just saw.

Nothing.

So when the black Maserati that I'm so familiar with comes into view, idling at the curb, I run for it. I run so fucking fast that my lungs burn and the tears in my eyes dry. Pulling open the door, I climb into the passenger seat and face James with newfound rage.

"Where the fuck is she!"

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Twenty-Eight

Royce

Torture is a weapon, not a kill shot. It's an art, and it just so happens to be something I excel at. The human body is expendable. The sole purpose for it is to heal itself. Amazing if you really think about it. I don't. Not often, anyway. But when I have someone hanging from his tied hands connected to the ceiling of a basement, blood spilling out of his mouth and nose, and his jeans with piss stains drenched through the fabric, it's the only thing I can think about.

Placing a cigarette in between my lips, I boot the man with the sole of my heavy foot and chuckle. "You're lucky as fuck it's not me you pissed off today."

The basement is tidy, with glossed out walls, mountains of kegs, and boxes of alcohol and wine. This bar isn't a shady strip joint or a scroungy hole in the wall type of bar; this is on the higher end of every scale. Allure is a cocktail bar in the heart of the city that attracts men and women with deep wallets. That's how WPMC do things. We never make the obvious choice. We're the wolves lurking behind the shadows of wealth. My phone vibrates against my thigh and I wipe the blood from my hands with my bandana—the same one I fucked Jade with last night—swiping it unlocked

while taking the cigarette out of my mouth, blowing out smoke. "He's ready for you. Found out the cartel told him to shoot warning shots and the dumb fuck just so happened to spray stray bullets out."

"On my way, but there's something you need to know." His strident tone doesn't bother me or throw me off. His wife just died in his arms.

"What's that?"

"Jade took off somewhere. Didn't see where. She was too quick for any of us to catch her."

"What?" I bark, but then count to ten in my head when I realize I need to ask someone that isn't Lion about where the fuck she went. "Alright, well I'll head back to the clubhouse. We're at Allure." I hang up my phone and snatch the keys to my bike.

"You off?" Wicked asks from the other side of the room, flicking the gold rings around on his finger, disinterested.

"Yeah. Jade has run off."

"What?" Wicked stands to his feet quickly, brows pulled in. "I'm coming."

"Why?" I pull on the door, leaving Fluff in the room with the dumb fuck while exiting through the emergency back exit.

Wicked swings his leg over his bike. "Because I've been trying to play with shit in my head, and something doesn't add up. I want to be there when you ask around, see if I pick up anything."

I turn my head toward him, flicking my cigarette onto the gravel. "You think this has to do with her little boyfriend?"

"Yeah," Wicked says, and we both start up our bikes.



"Someone tell me something!" I say as soon as we're back at the clubhouse and I've parked my bike. I make my way to the first man I see, who just so happens to be Roo. He ambles toward me with his wide shoulders and thick trunk legs.

"Yeah, bro. She came down to the kitchen after her shower, chill as fuck and holding a plastic bag filled with her bloodied clothes. She got a text or some shit on her phone and her whole demeanor shifted. I watched as she tensed, her eyes fucking burned through me when I asked her what was wrong. She pressed her phone to her chest and bolted. I tried to chase her, got to the gate, but she had already gotten into a dark Maserati with no plates."

"Black?" I ask, unfamiliar panic twitches in my gut. "You sure it was black?"

Roo flips me off. "Yes. I'm not colorblind." Instantly reaching for my phone, I find her number and hit dial.

"Think that's her boyfriend's car?" Roo asks, brow cocked.

I grind my teeth when her voicemail hits. "Don't know."

"You don't care that I just called him her boyfriend?" Roo has a tendency of putting humor in everything and in other times, I would welcome it, but I don't think that's what he's doing right now.

"I don't give a fuck," I scoff, hitting dial again.

"Why the sudden change of attitude?" Roo further urges, and he's starting to get on my last fucking nerve.

I hold him in place. "Because I'm her fucking man."

"Alright, Tarzan," Roo jokes.

Wicked's eyes zero in on Roo. "So she left with nothing but what she was wearing?"

Roo nods, and I watch their conversation while I continuously hit dial on her phone.

After the fifth time, I bring it back down to type out a text when I receive a FaceTime call from an unknown number. I know who it is when it's unknown. A growl escapes my

mouth, bubbled with frustration. Annoyed that Diamond is picking now of all fucking times to bother me with his fucking games. Tapping on the video, it opens to a girl in a sleek black dress with her back turned to me. The same girl he always uses in the videos he sends me. Her hair is straightened dead flat, falling to her lower back, but that's not what piques my interest first. It's the long bunny ears from the half mask that she's wearing. Her slim fingers flex from behind as he moves backward, the silence loud enough to pierce my eardrums. It feels different this time.

"Bunny." His voice is slow, more intimate now. Even with his bullshit machine hiding it. "Turn around for me like a good little girl."

"Yo! I don't have fu—" Dread fills me as she slowly turns and the side of her profile cuts through the lens. When the girl finally faces me, her green eyes popping up at me through the leather black mask, my anger takes control and my fist flies through the back window of my car. "Fuck!" I yell, clutching the phone in my hand. Wicked and Roo gather closer, but everything else ceases to exist except for what I'm watching on my phone.

"You see this, Royce? She makes a cute little bunny, don't you agree?" He moves the camera around her body as she drops to her knees, ropes tied behind her back. Her eyes glass over, vacant, submissive, as he gently runs his finger down her black mask and over her petite face. "I planned this to end differently, but you just couldn't play along, could you, Bunny." H?" is suit comes into view as his hand dips lower, down to the front of her breasts. The muscles in my jaw jolts, my shoulders squaring as undiluted rage simmers to the surface of my skin.

I steady my breathing, unable to fucking see straight. "You fucked up now."

His laugh is a loud cackle that shoots straight through my ears and hits all of my anger points on its way out. His face

appears at the lens, only he's wearing a ski mask to hide behind. "I was counting on it."

Wrath deepens its claws into my skin as the video continues to play. Her clothes aren't torn, a black dress clinging to her tiny figure. She looks dressed for an event. My palms itch with sweat, heat flushing through me. I'm going to kill this motherfucker.

I feel Wicked come up behind me to see the video. His energy shifts so drastically that I pause, flicking up to see what his problem is. His face is pale, all color drained from his skin. He's zoned in on the video, jaw clenching. "Jesus Christ." He shakes his head, stumbling backward. "I should have known."

"Known what?" I snap at him as the video continues to play in my hand.

"It's fucking her." He buries his hands into his hair, tugging on the ends in frustration. "I should have known," he croaks.

"I'm losing my fucking patience," I grate, my eyes pinned on his.

He clears his throat. "She was in my den."

I still, blood turning cold. "You got the wrong one. This is about me. Diamond took her because of me."

Wicked shakes his head firmly, his demeanor softening. I know he's not fucking around. "She was in my den. After you all left."

My mouth slams closed. I'll address this later, right now we're on the clock. I need to know what the fuck is going on.

"What the fuck do you want?" I say into the camera.

His laugh is loud enough to rock the ground under my feet. I need to control my anger. Wait on it. Hold on to it like a loaded gun and only fire it when I have him within reach. The camera moves and I catch movement in the corner where another girl is curled. When she looks up to the lens, I instantly notice it as being Sloane. *What the fuck.* Why would he take Sloane as well. Jade is enough to move me to

do whatever the fuck he wants. Sloane looks different from how Jade looks. No dress. No mask. The fear that is etched into her face makes it obvious that she hasn't been injured in this world.

Why doesn't Jade have that same air of fear?

My eyes swing back to Jade. Placid. Vacant. Stoic. Unmoving. Dead inside. *It all makes sense.* Wicked is telling the truth. There's more to Jade than what she's been telling me, and definitely to what I know. Has this fuck been fucking with her since I left too?

"I'm going to find you, I'm going to unmask and find out who you are, and then I'm going to peel the flesh from your bones."

"Tsk, tsk," he says, waving his finger in front of the camera. "You really shouldn't make threats while I have your most—" He pauses behind Jade, his hands dipping inside the slit of her dress. I squeeze the phone in my hand as I watch movement beneath the dress. "Prized possession." His breathy laughter lingers. "She's nice and wet. Just how much do you know about your innocent little Duchess, Royce? Do you know that she requires a certain level of pain to enjoy being fucked?" He stands from his position and wipes his finger over his suit. "Which admittedly is why I always make sweet, sweet love to her. It's all a torture game. So let me ask you," he says, finally picking up the camera. "Do you want to play?"

"Just say yes," Wicked growls from beside me. I gape up at Wicked with a scowl, who mouths, "We will kill him."

I come back to my phone. "Yeah, game on." I cast a look over to Slim, who peers up from his laptop that's on top of the hood of my car. "You get it?"

"It was hard. He had all sorts of coding and anonymous bullshit wired to his location. He was good." Slim grins up at me. "But I'm better."

"You smart little fuck."

Wicked pulls open the passenger door, sliding in as Slim, Roo, Billie, and Fury, all run to their bikes. Today will go down as one of the worst days in fucking history. I need Jade back safe. Whether she's going to be back in my arms or not is up to how this plays out.

We're on the highway with Slim, Fury, and Fluff rolling behind us. Roo and Fury split off to roll up in a different direction, needing to set up at their location. The air between Wicked and I is tense. More tense than ever. I pull out my phone and hit dial on Lion. He answers on the fifth ring.

"Yeah?" I can almost hear the satisfaction in his voice. Must be a deep blood bath in that basement right now.

"Jade is in trouble. Has to do with Diamond. He sent me a fucking video of her tied and gagged with a fucking mask on."

Silence.

I carry on. "Turns out Wicked says she was in his den."

"You got enough men with you?"

"Yeah, I think. Just put the word out to the Nevada chapter. Might need them to roll in if shit goes south. Don't know how many people Diamond has on his bankroll."

Lion grunts on the other line. "They're already here, almost at the clubhouse. Along with New Mexico and Oregon. Idaho and Texas wanted in, but I held them back for now. Gonna be a lot of angry fuckers at the clubhouse over the next few days."

"Good." I grind my teeth, biting back the satisfaction that brings me. "Perfect."

"Sort your woman out." Lion's voice is thick. "And Royce, don't be a fucking idiot with her and go in guns blazing ready to rip her apart. Let her explain."

I hang up on him without answering. I don't need anyone in my head where Jade is concerned. She occupies all the space I have available as it is.

"He's right," Wicked murmurs.

"Shut the fuck up. Tell me everything."

Wicked shuffles in his chair. "Remember the day you all got thrown into my den?"

Yeah...

"We shouldn't be running or fighting him. Something tells me whoever this sick fuck is, he's smart. Smarter than even Storm," Orson said, bouncing the ball between his legs and passing it to me.

I shrugged. "He's fucking human, man. If we give him the power now, who the fuck knows the kind of shit he's going to pull with us over the years." I flicked my wrist and shot from the three-point line.

Orson caught my rebound. "I say we make it clear where we stand right the fuck now." We were supposed to be out of the Bay Area fucking yesterday, and although I want to rebel against whoever this fucker is, something tells me that he isn't someone you want to fuck with.

"Except we're gambling with Jade and the rest of our family." I go to steal the ball from under the hoop, bouncing backward to shoot up.

"I think he's full of shit." Storm, the most he has said since this whole thing kicked off.

I paused mid-bounce. "And why is that?"

"Why us? Why? He's just trying to either pull a prank or fuck with us. I say, fuck him." He pulled his aviator glasses down to cover his eyes.

"Alright," Orson said, swiping the sweat from his forehead and tossing the towel back onto the pool chair. "We should tell our parents. They're powerful, let's utilize it."

Clasping my gold chain back around my neck, I nod my head. "Yeah, my dad is in his office. We'll start with him."

*"Your old man is right," Orson said after we left his office and headed back to my room. Jade wasn't home yet, which made me antsy. I sent her off a quick text message to ask her what time she would be back and tell her that she was late. A few minutes later she sent back the middle finger emoji. My fingers flew over my keypad before I sent off the word: **brat**.*

I pushed my phone back into my pocket and kicked my leg up on the desk. "Yeah, he didn't want us to say anything to your parents. He said he would handle it. I trust him."

"You do?" Storm murmured flatly, opening his laptop.

"Why would I not? He's my dad." His answer was weird, but that was Storm.

He shrugged. "I just wasn't so sure."

Orson picked up the basketball that was beside my bed and started spinning it around the tip of his finger. "So now we wait."

"We wait."

I remembered nothing. Blank spots filled my memory as I lifted my hand up to touch my head. Blindfolded. "Fuck!"

"Roy?" Orson called out from somewhere in the room.

"Yeah, bro. It's me. Storm?"

Storm grunted roughly from behind me. "Here."

"Are you all blindfolded too?"

"Yes," Orson hollered, with the sound of his jeans shuffling against the ground. "You remember anything after being in your room?"

"No," I answered tightly, my muscles tensing as I tugged on the binds around my wrists. "Nothing after falling asleep." We all crashed in my room eventually, waiting for my dad to "handle it."

Hands tucked beneath my blindfold, tearing it off. A boy around my age with wide shoulders and short hair was glaring down at me with cold, distant eyes. "Don't try to

fight anything,” he says. “Just go with it.” I reared back from him, snarling.

“How do I know that Diamond isn’t you?”

Wicked stares at me blankly. Unnerved and unfazed. “Because I’m not.”

“And we’re supposed to believe you?” Orson said, snarling. “Boy, take my blindfold off.”

“I’d listen to him,” I said, spitting the blood that’s pooling in my mouth. He moves to Orson, removing his blindfold and ties around his wrist before shifting to Storm.

“I’m Lenox, and I ain’t fucking him.”

He finally came back to me, removing the tight ropes around my wrists. I flexed them around in circles. A loud crackle of sound echoed through speakers as I finally took in the room. Dark walls, one bed, one chair. No windows, no mirrors, one door—with a small window in the front. It smelled of bleach and expensive perfume. Maybe we’re in a lab inside a house.

“Welcome, boys. Since you decided to defy me and attempt to run, consider this your warning and your punishment.” His voice was the same. The unnatural robotic undertones a dead giveaway that whoever this bastard was, he didn’t want anyone knowing. “I’m going to starve you to within an inch of your life, and then I will feed you whatever I wish to feed you. You will do as I say while you’re in here or I will start killing off each of your family members, starting with Jade.” My blood turned cold again. “You will do everything I tell you to do, and if you oblige to all, I will free you on the sixteenth day with your vehicles, your necessities, but not your dignity. You will be required to perform tasks to meet my needs. All tasks must be completed. All you will have is each other in this den. All you will see is each other, all you will fuck is each other, and all you will eat, will be each other. If you don’t listen, that is. Otherwise, I might be kind and feed you someone in my freezer.”

I stilled, all of us foraging around the room while every now and then our eyes would land on each other.

“I’m a powerful man. Don’t believe me? When you get out of here—if you do—Google Diamond. You’ll get an idea.”

I’m squeezing the steering wheel, refusing to relive the sixteen days we spent together in what Diamond called The Den. “What happened when we left?” My voice is cold, distant.

I wish I could say that we obeyed him from the second we were abducted into The Den, but fuck, of course we didn’t. He lived up to everything he promised, though. In a way, I think that’s why the four of us formed an even stronger bond. We left on the sixteenth day, but Wicked stayed behind. He wasn’t released until the twenty-first day, which is why we’re having this tense fucking conversation. I was pretty fucked up after it all happened. The club healed me; Lion saved me. I could have lost myself the day that I walked into Patches, but instead I found myself. A new family. I tried therapy anyway, because I was young and fresh out of being in the millionaire kids’ club. It was the answer to everything growing up. Something your parents can’t handle? Off to a flashy therapist who’d drain your parents’ pockets dry while making you feel like a colossal fuck up. You don’t need therapy when you’re around people who don’t make you feel like you’re alone or crazy or fucked up for surviving the shit you did.

Wicked clears his throat. I already know that I won’t like anything that comes out of his mouth. But like a sucker for pain, I need to know. I need to know every single fucking detail.

“You want to do this now?” Wicked says as I floor it forward, picking up speed. Motorbikes swerve in and out in the rearview mirror, catching up quickly.

“Yeah, I fucking do. Just can’t promise I won’t crash this fucking car and kill us both.”

Wicked doesn't answer. After a beat of silence—a long fucking beat—the words I didn't want to hear left his mouth. "He made me do shit to her. Brought her into my Den, same rules. Said she was fresh meat—" Wicked pauses and my breathing catches up heavily. The pulsing in my head is only intensifying, my jealousy rearing its fat fucking head. "—that only he had taken a bite out of." My control snaps and I swerve into the other lane and drop down, gaining more speed. "Brother, I need you to know that I had no choice."

I can hear the wariness in his voice. The way his head moves from front-on to sideways, watching the road and me. The road and me.

"Carry the fuck on, brother." I need to pull myself together if I have any chance of surviving this story when I know what is coming. I know Diamond and how he fucking operates. I may not know who the man is behind the mask, but I know his traits. His taste. Thinking that Jade is tangled up with him makes me fucking murderous. One word keeps flashing through my mind in neon fucking light.

Regret.

Wicked doesn't hold back. "She came in dressed in suit pants and a fucking bra. Her hair was all tidy, her makeup on point. She—"

I cut in, "—to be clear, not saying that you knew because you obviously didn't, but she was fucking fifteen." I glare at him over my arm. "Fifteen, Lenny!"

Wicked has a poker face that could conquer Las Vegas, but throwing his real name at him has his cheek twitching.

"I didn't know." He shakes his head, running his big hand through his hair. "Fuck!" He punches my leather dash a few times. "Fuck!" I've never seen Wicked lose his cool. Not ever. He's famous for keeping himself calm and collected. Unlike the rest of us unhinged bastards.

"It's not your fault," I exhale, needing him to continue but not wanting him to blame himself. Wicked had a baby sister once, he knows how it is. He'd never willingly fuck an

underage girl. The baby sister story plays a big part in why he doesn't like people calling him Lenny.

He clears his throat, and I know the rest of the story is going to come out pained. "She came in. Dressed up with a little bunny mask on and a shit load of makeup. She didn't look fucking fifteen."

I study him over my shoulder, finally slowing my speed down. "Would it have mattered? You wouldn't have taken a few days off—" I pause, knowing I shouldn't go there but needing to, to drive my point home. I need Wicked at one-hundred percent when we war, and this one is going to be a cataclysm. "—her life." I didn't want to say her name. Fuck, if it was Jade, I'd strangle the vocal cords out of anyone who so much as breathes her name.

Wicked sighs, his defeat heavy in the air. "Yeah. Anyway, she came in. He ordered her to do shit to me and me her. He told me I had to fuck her like she was a lover. It was weird, but nothing new from the shit we had to go through."

I snort. "Yeah, what like actually fucking a girl this time?" Throwing it out there in the open for the first time left uneasy tension in the space between us, but I didn't give a fuck. I was done giving this cunt access to my shame. "Brother, what happened between all of us in there doesn't mean shit."

Wicked shuffles. "It's not that. I mean, not the sex. I ain't fucking gay—"

My hands go up. "—and neither am I! But you and I both know sex is sex."

Wicked rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. I was fucking with him. None of us touched each other willingly after what he made us do in The Den. We all felt debased. The act in itself was difficult to digest because it's not my sexual preference, but that's not what made all of us feel violated. It was the fact that our choice had been taken away. We were no longer ourselves. We built L'artisaniant for two purposes. Well, if I'm being honest, three.

The first, and most important was to take money off rich motherfuckers and put it into the pocket of an underground anonymous misfit group who were about to shred open child trafficking in the US. It was something that Wicked was close to since his sister was taken. She wasn't a child, but she was young like Jade. The government doesn't seem to be doing shit, but this group of civilians have split open the seams of some of the most notorious cases around not just the US, but Europe too. Gaining access to files, video footage, photos, and exposing everything through their website while protecting the identity of the children. No one knows who they are. No one. Not even us, and we fund them.

The second, was to draw in Diamond and his sexual methods. Never fucking worked. He never set foot in there. The names of people who entered were always sent to Anonymous, who would check their records. Anyone who came through L'artisaniant that was on their files, we handed over to them. It was a net for sexual predators.

The third, was our own sexual needs. All four of us have a sexual hunger on the same level, only different tastes. We're selfish bastards like that. Everything that happens in L'artisaniant is above age with consenting adults. Using an exclusive sex club to draw in sexual predators was how we humiliated them, and then furthermore, the money went back into the pockets of the group who was fighting them, who would then spread funds out to the people that they saved.

Wicked ignores me. "It lasted right up until I left. He made me train her, said that's why I wasn't to leave when you all did. Said if I tried to leave, he'd kill—" He pauses. "Poppy." It was the first time I had heard her name since he first told me the story of his sister and how he ended up with Diamond.

Poppy was fourteen when she met Diamond.
She was fifteen when she died.

Wicked thought she died when she was fourteen, but that wasn't the case at all. Poppy's story and her last year alive was far more sinister than that. When Wicked found out she was still alive, she was fifteen years old. He tried to save her. With everything inside of him. He couldn't.

"So I did what he wanted, and Jade seemed to go with it for the most part. I'm going to be honest with you always, Royce. I straight-up thought she was working *with* Diamond, and that's why she was allowed in and out. Always looked nice. Well looked after. Wore the most expensive clothes and never took her mask off. Never spoke. We never spoke to each other, and I think we both preferred it that way."

"What'd you do together..." I take the next turnoff, checking the brothers are still behind me.

"Everything."

Squeeze.

"He let me go after he said I had completed her training and told me Poppy was already dead and that—" He pauses again and I know the next thing he's going to say is going to hurt. Anger wraps itself around the next words that come out of his mouth. "Said *she* was our last meal."

My blood turns cold, freezing my limbs. I pick up speed again and floor it forward, needing this to kick off. I need to smell blood in the air and the sound of flesh being pounded.

"Sorry, brother."

"Today's the fucking day," he whispers, but I don't look over at him, wanting to allow him his privacy.

"Today's the day."

"Royce," Wicked says, just as we're pulling down one of the back streets that leads into an apartment complex that's situated on the corner of a crossroad intersection in the city.

I bring my eyes to his. This big motherfucker who had his heart taken from him the day his sister died and now walks around as the shell of the man he used to be. "Yeah?" I know I'd kill for him. Die for him. I know I can't be mad at

him for what happened between him and Jade, or that he fucked her at L'artisaniant. If anything, it brings a kind of peace. Could have been anyone fucking her in that Den with Diamond, would have rather it be Wicked. Even if it does make me want to kill the both of them. The two people I would die for make me want to kill them both.

It fucking bothers me that she obviously knew who Wicked was, though. If she's been keeping that from me, fucking what else has she been hiding up that sleeve.

Wicked shakes his head. "Be careful with her. You don't know how deep in she is."

I squeeze the car door handle. "Yeah, I fucking know."

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Twenty-Nine

Jade

A well-made lie will continue to burn the tip of your tongue well after you've been fed truth.

My fingers are twitching, my brain moving at speeds that a snail could lap. My tongue sticks to the top of my mouth like a sponge, desperate for water, or any fluid. An ice-cold Coke would satiate my thirst at levels not even water could reach right now.

"Jade?" Sloane croaks from the side, and I turn to face her. She's lying down in a white dress, the opposite of my black but the same style. Her hair is straightened, falling down her back while mine is crinkled into waves, dropping above my butt. Red bottom heels are on my feet, pointed tips and shiny. Hers the same.

"You okay?" I ask, but the words fall out like a jumble of letters, unwilling to remain in a straight line.

She nods, sitting up from the made bed made with Egyptian cotton sheets and scattered rose petals. "What's happening? I feel drugged..."

"You are," I whisper, already knowing the room I'm in. The apartment complex downtown. It's owned by James, but instead of the usual tenants that most complexes have, his

is occupied in levels. There are twelve, and at every level, someone dripping in evil occupies it. I have met evil in my life, and all those times it was right here, in the basement level of this complex. One a politician, another a software engineer, another I suspect working in some undercover legal area. When James hosts an event every month, he puts the buyers in a room. Some are reoccurring, some new. The human trafficking has worsened over the years, but what James offers is something that not many can grasp onto.

Young, beautiful, and at times, virgins. *Young. Young.*

"I know every corner and every hole in this place," I say to Sloane, kneeling in front of her with my hands on her knees. "I will get you out."

Tears prick the corner of her eyes as she wobbles to her feet. "What is this place?"

I take her hand in mine. "It's an apartment complex right in the center of the city." Because James was smart. He didn't do his dealings in a dingy building. He took what everyone thought they knew about human trafficking and refined it, putting it right in the center of town, and right around the corner from the LAPD. They would never guess it. Smart or stupid, or a combination of both. I could never make up my mind, but one thing was for sure, James Doe was a tyrant.

Taking both of her hands in mine. "Listen to me very carefully, Sloane." I can't hear if someone is right outside the door or if they're about to walk in. The walls are soundproof, no windows. Just a single-bedroom apartment fitted with everything you would find in any apartment. Nothing out of the ordinary. There's a bed in the room, a dresser, a large TV, and some casual clothing. The room looks lived in, they all do, but they're all not.

The purpose of The Complex is pure horror, despite the obvious lavishness. Things have changed. Trafficking doesn't look the way it used to. These people have leveled

up. They're hiding behind normality, so no one sees anything out of the ordinary. It's what makes it so much more dangerous now.

"What about you?" she asks, squeezing my hand.

The door opens behind me and James' right-hand man steps through, his hands in his suit pocket.

"It's time." I smile at Sloane, hoping to ease some of her fear, but I feel like a fraud. I don't know what's going to happen. All I know is that I need to save her at all costs. She didn't ask for this. To be here, mixed up in this world. She's here because of me.

I turn, making sure to stand in front of Sloane and bring my eyes to Isaac. "How long have we been out?"

The first day I met Isaac, I was fifteen years old.

My thighs ached. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to get out of the car and enter this fucking house. I knew what awaited me, more torture. More cruelty. All he wanted to do was inflict pain through the gentlest way. Why? I wasn't sure. Why he made it such an effort to make my life a living hell, I will never know. Was he punishing me, or someone else through me?

I wanted it to be over.

I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror of the car. He was unmasked, but I could only see his eyes. The dark way they shifted until they were set on me. Hard. Feral.

The man in the back seat with me interrupted my staring. "He will allow you out when you're tasks are completed." The car came to a stop outside a small-sized cottage about an hour away from where I lived, the man beside me opened the back door, pushing it open. I followed behind him submissively until I was out on the driveway. No other houses were around us, completely gated in by a high wired white fence and shrubs that offered further privacy.

"What's your name?" I said to the man who was leading me through the front door of the cottage.

"Isaac." He was around the age of James. Stronger, longer, thick shoulders and a military-style cut. I didn't know much about what James did, but as every hour passed from when he first put his hands on me, I came to realize that whatever he did, it was evil, and to do evil, one must surround themselves with evil, so Isaac was a bad man.

Just like James.

Isaac continued to lead me down a long hallway. The home was vacant, with no furnishings inside of it, but it smelled fresh. Like bleach and another note I couldn't quite figure out.

His hand came to a door handle where he squeezed gently, his gold Rolex catching the dim light that hung above our heads from a crystal chandelier.

He looked at me from over his shoulder. "Do what he says, Jade." Then he pushed the door open and shoved me inside, where I fell to my knees. The door slammed closed behind me, my eyes flying around the room.

Dark bed. Black sheets. No window. The smell of bleach was potent enough to burn the hairs in my nostrils.

Someone stepped out from the shadow in the corner, his body wide, his jaw square. For a brief second, I thought he was beautiful until I realized I was looking at a corpse.

I didn't speak. Neither of us did. All I knew was that I had my task to do every day while I was there, and I was only collected once it was done.

I don't know why.

I probably will never know or understand why James wanted him and I to do what we did. When I first met Wicked, I recognized him instantly. At first, I was worried that he had noticed me, but he hadn't. He had touched every inch of my body, fucked me in every single place that the human body can be fucked, but he didn't recognize me.

I don't think.

Isaac is in the space that occupies the elevator, all air sucked from the small confinement. Isaac didn't speak much, but when he did, he did it with purpose. I always wondered why, or what must have happened to him to turn him evil, or whether he was maybe just like James and born that way. The numbers on the elevator go down.

11.

10.

9.

8.

7.

6.

5.

4.

Until we hit ground zero.

And then we drop lower.

The symbol that appears on the elevator number was simple, yet the very look of the light rose feelings inside of me that I tried to crush.

The Diamond.

The metal doors slide open and Sloane breathes from behind me in slow, deep inhales.

I turn to face her as Isaac steps out, waiting for us. "Relax, okay? It's going to be fine." When I turn back around, I'm instantly hit with a flood of memories from over the years and images of the times that I've set foot in here. The room is dark, with leather bench seats lining the walls. There are orange LED lights beneath the seats, lighting the otherwise hazy atmosphere. The bar is in the middle of the room in a circle, and in all four corners of the vast space, there are platforms with white LED lights circling them. The stages are important. It's where they display the girls. There are three showings throughout the night, twelve girls in total. Out of the twelve, at least one will be a virgin.

Not every girl is sold for sex, this is human trafficking. It can be slavery, sex, mistresses, hell—it could be whatever

the buyer wants it to be. There are husbands and wives who come in together, too. There are people who you might sit next to at church on Sunday who would come to a showing.

The bartender's face is covered with a cloth around his mouth, hiding his identity, as people are scattered around socializing as they socialize. Soft, haunting music plays in the background, an organ with the keys being pressed a little too hard. It reminds me of the ocean, and of Pirates of the Caribbean. It reminds me of Davy Jones and his locker.

I begin walking toward the curtain where I know James is, when Isaac's hand comes to my arm, halting me. "You won't be needing to go back there tonight."

I look down at his arm, before coming back to his face. "Why?" Dread fills my bones well before I asked the question, the ground falling away beneath my feet. If what I think is about to happen happens, then I can't help Sloane. Not even a little. Her only way of escaping was through that curtain and in James' emergency escape room.

Isaac's eyes flicker, but before I can catch it, it's gone. "You know why, Jade."

"Me?" I ask through a whisper. "I'd rather die." Yanking my arm out of his grip, I spin around and run toward the curtain, leaving Sloane behind. She would be safer out here for now until I figure out what James is planning to do. Whipping the curtain open, the room is empty. Stepping inside, I take a good look around. The black leather chair, the TV monitors, the whiskey tray, and the burning cigar laying in a glass ashtray.

Spinning around to grab Sloane so we can make a run for it, I slam into James' chest and just as I'm about to yelp, he stabs me with a needle in the crook of my neck and everything turns black.

I was back to the first time I was brought here, only it's different. It feels familiar, while the whispers of ghosts from the previous people float around the space.

I was on my knees. Awaiting what James was going to do. I couldn't get the image of the girl out of my head, though. It was bothering me. I didn't know why, but it was like a mirror was behind me and I was staring at my reflection.

"Jade." James entered, naked from head to toe as orange LED lights softly lit up the room from beneath the seating. The bar was in the center. Where a few men were seated in this room. Maybe this was a more intimate area to what was happening out there.

The men are a range of differences, suited, fat, skinny, young. Why would they be here?

I turn to face James as he grips his large cock in his hand. "Show them how you suck cock."

I wrapped my fingers around his length, fighting the bile that was rising up my throat. I didn't want to do this. I knew I had to. My body and soul repulsed from him, yet I continued to pump. When I didn't open my mouth on to his smooth skin, his hand comes to the back of my head and he directs me over the tip. Sticky salt stuck to my lips like glue, as I parted them, taking him wholly into my mouth.

Tears sprung to the back of my eyes. He had stolen all the firsts that I was supposed to give to someone I loved. Someone who made me feel the way Royce did, only not so forbidden. Every time he pumped into my mouth, the hole in my heart stretched wider and wider.

When he had finally finished, he spun me around and yanked my panties over my ass from behind. My eyes came up to the men who were in here. One standing now, his hand hidden under the waistband of his pants.

Another sitting, his legs wide while he rubbed his wobbly belly. His finger circled his button as his eyes turned heady. Another remained passive. Quiet in the corner but I could hear his grunts from here.

The last one was in the same position, his eyes hard on mine. It was Isaac, I noticed, and I don't know if he realized

it, but I could see the way his features paled. It looked as if he was going to be sick.

"She was a virgin and is still just fifteen. But don't worry," James says, dropping soft kisses down the nape of my neck. My stomach recoiled and spun like a tornado threatening to bring everything up from my belly. Don't fucking touch me like that. "She has had her training, and the boy who trained her was excellent."

My arms are weighted, eyes sticky. My hair falls in tangles down the sides of my shoulders, my muscles twitching every time I move my arms. I look down to the ground.

Drip.

Drip.

Blood is falling slowly, hitting the shiny black tiles. I try to lift my arm again to stop the whites of the lights blinding me. Everything is hazy.

I bring my hand up to my face, but it's slow. Furnishings and people melt together to form indistinguishable shapes. There are four bartenders, but I think there's only one. I shiver, my skin exposed to hungry eyes. I want to do something. Help. Yell. Find Sloane, but I can't seem to move my limbs past standing up and swerving around like a limp Barbie. There's a hunger deep in my belly, but I don't know what for. The longer I'm awake, the more my head thumps, until I need to squeeze my eyes closed in order to talk myself down.

Finally, I manage to look at my arms, dots track the inside of my elbows, but that's not where the blood is coming from. There's a fresh cut that slices down from my elbow to my wrist. It looks bad.

I don't care. I need something, anything to take away this headache, to make me feel good.

"This next girl is my fallen bunny. Some of you may recognize her," James' voice pulses through the speakers. "I

am well aware how many of you have had your eyes on her over the years, so her starting bid is at five-hundred."

A green light flicks in the corner as someone else bids.

"Five-oh-eight." James' throaty laughs boasts through the room.

My eyes close.

Drip.

Drip.

Pop! Loud shots sound out from behind me, but I can't move my body. I see out the corner of my eye as everything in the room shifts drastically. People scatter, probably heading for the emergency exit.

I need something.

Colors blur together in obscurity, before the muscles in my legs turn numb and I'm falling, the ground getting closer and closer to my face. The pain in my head is excruciating now, like jagged claws stabbed into the mush of my brain. Bullets rain down over me as I roll onto my back. Yelling, fighting, and glass shatters, splintering through the air. I'm ready to die.

A shadow comes to the front of me as arms tuck beneath my body, lifting me from the ground. My head hangs over his arms. I'm unable to muster the strength I need to pull myself up.

A curtain is being pulled back as I'm carefully lowered to the sofa in a room.

The computer monitors.

The cigar now gone from the glass ashtray.

Another shadow is in front of me now, not the same one, and I bring my eyes up to find skinny arms, faded jeans, and a leather cut— "Slim?"

His eyes fall down to me, his brows turned in in worry. He kneels in front of me as I try to sit up from the sofa.

"No, Jade. Stay there. We need to stitch you up."

I grasp on to the polished leather of his cut, his is nowhere near as worn as Royce's, and pull him into me.

"Where's Royce? Something's not right with me."

His beady eyes fly to my arm. "He shot heroin into you. Just ride it out, okay?"

As the minutes pass, lucidity spreads awareness throughout my mind, and I slowly find myself being able to focus a little more. The headache is still there, but it's not as bad. Now I'm starting to feel the sting on my arm, the open wound that I will need to dress.

Just as I finally push myself up into a sitting position, Wicked walks in carrying Sloane, his face turned in and animated. He's angry. Feral.

Sloane's blonde hair is muddy, her forehead bleeding. Instantly I shoot up from the couch, as if finding my second wind. "Sloane!"

Wicked lays her out on the sofa where I was, her face pale and unmoving. She's wearing her panties and bra, white, where mine is black, just like our dresses. Her Valentinos are still clasped around her ankles.

I look up at Wicked. "What's wrong!"

He shakes his head, his eyes remaining hard and passive on her frozen body. "She's alive, I think she fainted."

Just as he says the words, she stirs, her eyes opening up to mine. "Jade?"

I burst into tears, unable to contain the emotions that are exploding inside of me.

"Thank god!"

The curtain opens again and this time, Storm walks in, his eyes frantic until he finds me. They drop up and down my body, checking me over before he takes the steps needed until I'm in arm's reach. Pulling me into his chest, he kisses me on my head.

"It's almost over."

I wish that were true, but I don't have it in my heart to tell him that there's no way this is over. That James would have run through that emergency door and through his

passage and probably be almost at the private airstrip by now. I find the red door out of instinct.

"Not possible," I sigh, snuffing my runny nose.

Just as I say the words, Orson appears through the emergency door, his large shoulders eating up the space. His eyes meet mine and soften before going to Storm. "Take the girls out of here."

"What?" I snap between the two of them. "Why?"

Orson shakes his head. "You shouldn't have to witness what's about to happen."

I square my shoulders, my fists clenching in my hand. The stinging on my arm is worsening. I know I need to clean it up quickly before it turns to fire and infection seeps in. "He's gone! That!" I point to the door that Orson just came through. "Is his exit. Only I know where it is, and that's why he announces the sales from in here, and if he didn't get through his secret exit, he would have used the community one that—" Isaac steps through the door behind Orson, his suit stained with smudges of blood. At first, I think it's because they've hurt him, until he turns to Wicked.

"Jade, Orson is right. You shouldn't be here."

"What's happening!" I scream, frustration clinging to my nerves. "And where the fuck is Royce?"

"Royce is coming. But for now, you need to go out the main exit and take your friend. Friends of mine will be on their way through those doors in thirty minutes, and that's not enough time to do what is about to happen."

"And what's that?" I snap.

Isaac glares at me. "Creating a suicide."

I look around to all of them as Royce finally appears at the same emergency exit. "What the fuck!"

He refuses to look at me. I see it in the way he's watching Wicked.

"Royce," I wheeze, and I hate that I feel vulnerable. Exposed. The silence only angers me further, and my legs begin taking me to the door where he is. Someone reaches

for my arm to stop me, but Royce shakes his head to leave me.

I shove him. "Say what you're thinking!" I can feel the pain in my chest growing. The years of abuse, being stripped of my innocence and choices is nothing compared to the sheer agony of being dismissed by Royce the way I am now.

He continues to not stare at me. "Go get cleaned up. We'll talk later."

Reality claws its ugly nails into me, carving down the edges of my spine. "You think I was with him *willingly*?" I shove him again when he doesn't answer. "You motherfucker! You think I wanted your father to rape me every goddamn day after you left?!" The room instantly grew cold. I didn't think twice about the words that flew out of my mouth, because I gathered, they had known.

"Jade," Isaac growls, his mouth in a thin line.

"Fuck you!" I snap at Isaac, turning back to Royce.

His face is pale, but not in a way that makes him look weak. His eyes turn to a shade almost black as his pupils dilate. "*What did you just say?*" The veins in his neck pulse beneath his ink, his soft lips curling up in a snarl. Before I can stop him, he's turning around and heading back through the exit.

"Royce!" Wicked calls out, shooting forward to chase him.

I'm already running down the long exit, until I slam into Royce's back, blanketed in the darkness of the tunnel. It leads to a street in the city on the other side of town. I look down at what he's staring at and my body turns hard.

James is tied, his mask still concealing his face and his arms and feet tied.

My mouth opens, but then I snap it closed. My whole world is going to crash down and I know that I'll most likely lose Royce forever, but he needs to know. I'm tired of

secrets, and I'm tired of living in the shadows of another life that was thrust upon me.

Royce leans down, his finger hooking beneath his mask as he whips it off. My eyes close just as he stumbles back from shock.

James Doe aka Kyle Kane. I had no control over what he did to me all those years, so I decided to change his name. James Doe is the male equivalent to Jane Doe. What better name to call him than one of a soulless body.

“Jesus fuck!” Wicked’s hands dive to his hair. “Not what I suspected at all.”

Kyle’s face is calm, his eyes closed. He has bruises on his cheek and a bloody nose, but I know he’s not dead. I can see it in the way his chest rises and falls.

Royce drops to the ground, his hand coming to his mouth, his head shaking. Slowly, he looks up at me, his eyes glassed over and his face contorted into pain. “I’m—” He swallows, his eyes closing as more footsteps patter through the concrete tunnel from the basement of the complexes.

“Royce,” I say softly, tears falling down my face. I’ve lost the feeling in my hand now, but that seems irrelevant when the man I love is curled up after just finding out his father is the notorious K Diamond, the man behind the mask of the worst human trafficking and drug deals in the United States of America since the nineteen-hundreds. Someone takes my hand, but I keep my eyes on the top of Royce’s head. “I wasn’t working with him.”

“I know,” Royce finally says hoarsely, standing to his feet and making his way to me. His fingers come to the back of my neck. “But...” He can’t find the words, but his eyes are telling a full-length novel. They shoot over my shoulder and he shakes his head. “She needs to be part of this. More than anyone.” He scoops me up by the backs of my legs and cradles me into his chest, carrying me back the way we came. “Bring that bastard with you.”

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Jade

Revenge or forgiveness. They're the two words that sit on either side of the scale, as you decide where you're going to add your weight. I had thought about this day a lot. I dreamed of it. I never thought it would ever happen because I thought Royce was dead, and if Royce was dead, no one else was going to save me.

Not Orson.

Not Storm.

Not myself.

Isaac shifts closer to where I'm seated back on the sofa. Slim has taken Sloane on Wicked's orders, and the only people in here are me, Isaac, Royce, Orson, Storm, and Wicked. There are other men walking around in cuts that I don't know, guarding the curtain.

"You have fifteen minutes, Royce," Isaac croaks.

Royce removes his shirt and cut, slapping his father across the face with the back of his hand. I don't recognize this side of Royce right now. It's terrifying. "I've got questions. Wake the fuck up."

Kyle comes to, his freckled skin bruised and his eyes finding Royce.

Nothing.

Blank.

Then slowly, a smirk lifts on the corner of his lips. "Tsk, tsk, so the cat's out of the bag." Then his attention lands on me, and his smile falls. "Unfortunate you're still alive, Bunny."

Royce's hands come to the front of his father's throat. "I have fifteen minutes to end your life." Royce leans in until his lips find Kyle's ear. "But I only need one." He pulls back. "So you're going to tell me everything, and you're going to do it now."

Kyle brings his eyes to Royce. "So many things to tell you, so little time. How about you take me somewhere else, so we can have this discussion. Preferably somewhere where Lion is too."

Royce looks over his shoulder at Isaac.

Isaac shrugs, gesturing to Kyle. "You take him away from this scene, no one will ever know who K Diamond is. There will be no coverage. No trial. He gets no media attention, and it's hidden. Essentially, that rage you feel will burn out, and then all you'll have left is the stained bullshit he will leave on your hands, kid. You could kill him here and now and have my team run through it, but you'd have to live without knowing whatever it is he's hiding, or you can take him, and the stain that comes from his kill."

Royce doesn't need to think twice, he puts a cigarette between his lips and blazes the end. "Got enough stains to paint a fucking Helen Frankenthaler piece, Isaac. I'll take option one."

We arrive back at the clubhouse a little after that, Storm using that time to wipe the servers clean that showed Wolf Pack's involvement. Legally, it's going to look like a bloodbath, but in the midst of it, Storm said he managed to turn it into something else.

I'm wearing Royce's cut that falls to my upper thighs as I walk up the stairs that lead to the clubhouse, my heavy heels clicking against the pavement. Turning to the left, Bonnie's blood stains are still visible on the ground, and my heart stings all over again, unable to contain the hurt from losing her. What I went through today—aside from the killing—is something I go through all the time with Kyle, so over the years, it has numbed.

The death of Bonnie is new, fresh, and the sting of her death still sharpens everywhere I turn.

I push the door open and step inside, sobbing silently, hoping no one can hear.

"Jade?" Karli asks from the top of the stairwell, dropping the dishcloth she had in her hand and rushing down the stairs. Her arm flies around me as she guides me back up the stairs. I lose it. The sobs that wrack through me pull at my chest and cripple my bones. Waves of overwhelming pain slap me across the face as an anchor clamps around my throat, pulling me deeper and deeper into bottomless depths of unholy water. My throat contracts so tight that I struggle to breathe, just as Kara enters and hooks her hand around the other side of my back.

"Come on, girl. We'll get you tidied up." I want to tell them thank you but no, that I want to be alone, but I can't gather the energy to push them away. They just watched their best friend die. I doubt they want to mess around with me.

Kara pushes the door to Royce's room open and directs me to his bathroom, turning on the shower to scorching hot. The sobbing has stopped, my face unmoving. I feel frozen, my eyes dead. The range of emotions I have gone through in the last few hours isn't something I'm familiar with.

I need something.

Something to take the edge off.

Kara opens up the cupboard in the bathroom as Karli turns my arm over.

"We need to clean this up before you get in the shower. I think it's stopped bleeding, but we can put some butterfly stitches on it."

Kara finally finds the first-aid kit and I faintly hear her rummaging through the supplies.

"She's withdrawing," Karli whispers to Kara.

Kara stills. "No, she's not a fucking druggie, Karli!"

"I didn't say that!" Karli snaps. "But you forget what I've gone through. She. Is. Withdrawing."

"I'll be fine," I say through shaky lips. I reach for the antiseptic wipes but my hands shake. "Fuck." I know I'm strong enough to overcome the surges. "This is the first time he did this."

"First time?" Karli says, keeping her eyes on mine while blindly reaching for a wipe. "You're going to get through this real fast—" Cold stinging erupts through my flesh as she swipes away the germs. "I have a dark past. I can tell you now, one time will be better than one thousand." I remain quiet, not wanting to talk, or chat, or do anything. My mouth is as dry as cotton, my limbs limp. "In the shower!"

Karli leads and I gaze down at my arm to see she had put the butterfly stitches on perfectly. Removing Royce's vest from around my semi-naked body, Karli folds it up and places it onto the counter.

Kara comes behind me and unclasps my bra before removing my panties and helping me into the shower. "The boys will be back soon enough, okay? Royce will be back after they've done what they needed to do."

They both begin to wash me, from my hair, to my body, back to my hair, all while being careful around my cut. One of them hits the faucet and wraps a warm, fluffy towel around me, as I step out of the shower.

"Kara has laid out some clothes for you."

I take the vest in my hand, needing it near me as we enter back into the room.

I pause when I see Royce sitting on the bed, his hands covering his face.

Kara and Karli both look at each other, nod, and then leave, closing the door behind themselves. I squeeze Royce's vest in my fingers, staying put.

"He's in the back. Ready to spill all his secrets." His voice is strained, weak. I take the steps I need to reach him, kneeling down and curling my finger beneath his chin so he's looking directly at me. Seeing his obvious pain is like being shot directly in the heart. His eyes are glassy, his lashes damp.

"Roy, it's me."

His eyes widen for a second, the muscles relaxing in his face.

I lay his vest over my thighs and bring both of my hands to his face. I lean forward and press my lips to his. "Have your moment, but have it with me."

I watch as the first tear falls from the corner of his eye and he sniffs.

"I fucking had to leave. I couldn't stay—you—he used you! It was all a lie. A game. He—" His eyes turn frantic as his shoulders slack. He exhales, shaking his head and hanging it between his shoulders. "He was my fucking *dad*, Jade."

"Hey." I bring my hand back to his cheeks, my thumb gliding over his bottom lip. "Look at me." He does, his jaw tight. "You're here now. We're together now. We will go out there, he will tell us everything, you will tell me everything, and I, you, and—" I pause, picking up his colors and bringing it down over his hard shoulders. "—We will deal with this together." As soon as his cut is back on him, his arm is around my body and he's pulling me onto his lap.

Wrapping my arm around the back of his neck, I run the tip of my nose over his. "We've got this."

He kisses me on the mouth. "Get changed." His body hardens beneath me, his eyes turning hard. Not for me. But

for Kyle. “Daddy’s time is up.”

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Royce

If white noise was a feeling, it would be what is stirring inside of me right now as I look down at the man who I idolized all of my fucking life. Memories flash through my brain as he watches me pace back and forth on the back lawn, only every time a memory arises, I picture all the things he did to Jade—the things I know about.

“Where’s Lion?” he asks, but it’s not the tone I’m used to. He sounds different.

I don’t answer.

Wicked, Orson, Storm, and Jade are behind me, and I can almost feel the courage she’s pouring into me. She’s not just my rock, she’s my whole fucking world. I knew that from day one. My life began with her, and it’ll end with her.

“Let me guess.” Kyle laughs. “He’s putting a hit out on the cartel...” His eyes meet mine. “Except, it wasn’t him who killed little old Bonnie, it was me.”

I stop walking. “What?”

“Well, you see, I killed their Capo, and then made your signature kill, before hiring a couple of idiots to shoot up your compound. I started a war between you both. Really, it was to get Jade back—”

My fist flies straight into his face until blood splatters over me.

"You don't get to say her name." Wrapping my fingers around the leather handle of my knife, I bring the tip to his throat, just below his ear. "This pressure point right here, it's a silent kill spot. If you press hard enough—" I slightly turn my knife but pull back. "It will kill you by draining your blood over the course of hours. But I won't kill you like that. That's a peaceful way to die."

"Why?" I hear Lion ask from behind me, and I still, shocked to hear him. "Why?"

Lion moves closer until he's in front of Kyle. "We knew it was you. The cartel, we all did." Lion gestures behind himself. "You see the boys at the front of the house? All that back up was to storm your sick little complex. It wasn't for the cartel war." I smirk at Kyle, ambling backward.

"But you see," Lion further says. "We're in a situation, because you owe all of us. You have taken something from every single one of us who stands here today." Lion takes a seat on a chair opposite Kyle, but close enough to reach him. "Why?"

Kyle brought his eyes to Lion. "She was my best."

"Who was?" Lion asks, and I see his patience wearing thin. If he says Jade's name one more fucking time, I'm going to put my knife through the center of his skull. Fuck the torture game.

Kyle's mouth curves up, displaying his blood sodden teeth. "Olivia. Snow."

Lion shoots from the chair, grasping Kyle by the collar and yanking him to his feet. "What'd you say, motherfucker?"

Holy fuck. I step between the two of them, yanking Kyle back to his chair while glaring at Lion. "I get it, brother, I do, but we need to split this fair."

"It's no longer about Bonnie only," Lion says, glaring at Kyle. "He had something to do with Olivia."

"Who the fuck is Olivia?" I say, while everyone remains silent in the background. Good choice. Lion in this kind of episode never ends pretty. His eyes come to mine finally. "My old lady."

His words slide into place and I turn to face Kyle. "Enough. What the fuck is he talking about?"

Kyle smiles up at me, his eyes flicking between me and Lion. He's enjoying the pain he's inflicting on us now. "I'll tell you anything you want to know, after all, all I have are secrets."

"Why!" I snap. "Why play the perfect father all my life to turn into the villain?"

"Olivia Snow was my first lady, and only lady, until Jade." I have to clench my fist to stop myself from strangling him. Hearing her name come out of his vile lips tests all the restraint I already *don't* have. Kyle continues. "Had her since she was but a little girl, lost in the world yet only a few years younger than I."

"Olivia would never willingly walk beside you," Lion growls, and Wicked is standing on the other side of him now, holding him back. I'm missing something here.

"Well." The way Kyle's lips curl over his teeth has me fantasizing about knocking them all clean out. "She did, until things turned sinister and she saw how truly evil I was. But by then it was too late. It was too. *Late.*"

"What'd you do to her?" Lion asks tightly, his tone dropping to icy levels.

"Me? Nothing." Kyle's eyes flick to Jade. "Her, though?"

We all turn to Jade, who peers at us all in shock. "I don't know what he's talking about." I see the honesty. We promised each other honesty.

Kyle snorts. "You're all so quick to point the fucking blame. Not her as in she killed Olivia, well not really." I watch as the corner of his mouth kicks up in a grin, his eyes coming to Lion. "Tell me, did you not wonder why Jade's eyes looked so familiar?"

What the fuck is he talking about now.

Lion stills. "What the fuck are you sayin'?"

"She's your daughter, Lionel. Olivia was pregnant when she left you. Pregnant and trying to fucking run."

Lion stands from his chair and stumbles backward. "You're lying, motherfucker."

What the fuck.

"I'm really not. Get a test, but I'm sure you don't need one when you look into those eyes." A sharp beeping sound grows louder and louder behind my ears. "I allowed Olivia to see you, because by the time she had fallen in love with you, I had other plans and was building The Complex. I was busy, you fucked her right and kept her happy, and my taste was becoming more and more picky when it came to age. You kept her out of my hair, but you weren't supposed to get her pregnant." I run the palm of my hand over my cheek, being slapped with honesty is harder than I anticipated.

"What?" Jade's wobbly voice finally breaks through, stepping closer to Kyle, but my hand flies out, stopping her from coming any closer. "What the fuck do you mean, Kyle? You told me I was dumped on your doorstep."

"Well, fuck." Kyle's eyes bug out of their sockets. "Guess I'm a liar too?"

I grind my teeth, squashing this information for later. "Why? Why run me out of town, and Orson, and Storm!"

Blind thunder claps in the sky as I feel the first raindrop tap the tip of my nose. The smell of murder and damp asphalt is a heady combination tonight.

Kyle doesn't hesitate. "To get you away from Jade. I knew you were going to be an issue the second I picked up on the love you both had for each other. I couldn't have you taking what was rightfully mine. *She* is mine."

I flick my knife between my fingers and launch it into his thigh. Leaning down while pressing my free hand on his other knee, I inch in close, until my nose is almost touching

the tip of his. “She will never be yours. You may have been able to get me away from her, but it’s my name she went to sleep whispering at night, and it’s my name she screams when I’m between her thighs, and it’s my name that is engraved into her heart. All you did was fuck with fate.” I leave the knife there, pushing away from him.

“You did that to all of us to get us away from Jade...” Storm repeats, as if needing the words to sink into his brain. “Makes sense.”

Kyle bares his teeth, and I see the pain that flashes across his face from my knife. “She was going to be better than Olivia ever was, and for a brief moment, she was—”

“—until I came back.” I smirk at Kyle, taking the seat that Lion was on, directly opposite him.

“Hmm,” Kyle grunts. “Why was that?”

I lean forward. “Because you can’t fuck with fate.”

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Jade

Lion is my father, and my mom is dead. My real parents. People I didn't think I would ever know. I can't help but find myself studying every inch of Lion's face when he's not looking. Stealing glances of him when I can. I no longer care about Kyle and the evil which exists within him. I've spent too many years being touched and caressed by it that now, now that he's at our mercy, I don't want to go near him. I wished for this day so many times over the years, but now that it's here, finally staring at me point-blank in the face, I am no longer interested. Piqued by the revelation of knowing my biological father is too captivating, it's all I want to know. I want to know everything about him.

Fuck Kyle.

Fatigue is pulling me deeper and deeper into myself, but I will not walk away. Not because I need to see the violence that's about to occur, because I honestly don't, but because I promised Royce that I would be here, standing right beside him, through it all. I owe it to him and to myself to be that person for him.

"You came back for her? How sweet." Kyle chuckles. Royce has been patient for the most part. "You disobeyed

me!" Kyle roars, his eyes flaring with anger. "You were going to pay for it!"

"I fucking did disobey you." Royce starts cutting through Kyle's clothing until his shirt is split open, baring his chest before cutting through his pants. It's oddly pleasing seeing Kyle look so powerless for once. Over the years that I endured his abuse, that's one thing that he never looked.

Powerless.

I want to ask questions. Like what Royce means by driving him, Orson, and Royce out of town, and who my mother really was, but I already know that I wouldn't want any other view on my mother that doesn't come from Lion.

Those things can wait.

"And why?" Kyle further asks, watching Royce.

"Why did I come back?" Royce asks, stepping backward while regarding Kyle closely. He cocks his head. "Because Jade."

"Sick!" someone calls out from behind us and we all shift to see who it is.

Roo jogs over, leaning into Royce's ear to whisper something, his eyes coming to me every few seconds.

Royce pulls out the chair and takes a seat, as Roo disappears back where he came from. "How about why did you do all of this?"

When Kyle doesn't answer, Royce raises his foot and drops it down on top of his knife that's sticking out of Kyle's leg.

Kyle cries, wincing. His eyes come to Royce as saliva falls from his mouth, his lip curled. "Why, what? I told you. Jade was mine."

Royce chuckles before leaning forward, pulling the knife from his thigh and launching it into his other. "Last chance." Royce leans over, and I stop breathing.

"He did it because he's a bad man, Royce. That's it." I take a step toward him, my hand coming to his shoulder. Did I know if this was true? No. Was I going to allow Royce to

hold any of the blame for his father being a sick, twisted monster? Also no. I rest my other hand on his other shoulder, and I lean down, my eyes on Kyle as he watches the way Royce and I fold into each other. “Sometimes people are just bad. There’s no reason why they’re bad, or no defining moment that made them snap, sometimes, they’re just evil.”

“Hmmm,” Kyle says, shuffling in his chair. The day is turning to night, while clouds clap together in the sky. My exhaustion from today is heavy. “If only it were that simple.”

Lion’s eyes come to me. “Should have seen it earlier. How much you resemble her.” Taken aback by his admission, I find myself stumbling over the words I want to say.

Thank you? I’m sorry?

I look to Kyle. “What happened to her?”

Kyle spat blood from his mouth, glaring up at me from below his lashes. “She, let’s just say—disappeared without a trace.”

“Bu—” A loud bang explodes from the front of the clubhouse and I fall to the ground, the sound zoning in and out of my ears. Dust particles fall all around us in gray clouds of smoke. My head thumps, my skin aches. Someone heavy is on top of me, yelling and screaming in the distance. I can’t hear what anyone is saying over the sharp ringing in my ears, but I think it’s something like, “Run!”



Jade

My body aches. Every single time I move, my muscles contract. Wincing, I move from the sofa that's in the clubhouse, running my hands over my face. If there was a point that was past tired and exhausted, I'd be there.

"Hey," Kara says, handing me a hot mug and taking a seat opposite me. I blow into the liquid and smile.

"Thank you." The absence of all the testosterone is obvious. "Where is everyone?"

Kara shuffles in her chair. "They've gone after Kyle."

"He escaped?" I screech, horror clawing its way into me.

Kara exhales, nodding with an apologetic smile on her face. "He did. Someone blew up the gate and while the boys were distracted making sure you and others were safe, he ran. Royce said his ties were loose all along, and that he could have run at any time, but he wanted to be there." She pauses, and I place my cup onto the coffee table in front of me, unable to stomach anything right now. "He seems really bad."

"Kyle?" I ask. "Oh, he's much worse than that."

The front door opens and my eyes shoot up to find Slim walking through with an AK strapped around his chest. "Still

nothing.”

I groan, leaning forward while massaging my temples. “You’ll never find him unless he wants to be found.”

Slim’s phone rings in his pocket and he pulls it out, answering. I’m still stunned with the information that Kyle is out free, waiting to kill us whenever he would like.

Slim is handing me his phone, and I take it, bringing it to my ear. “Yeah?”

Silence. “You okay?”

I clear my throat. “Not really. Where’s Sloane?”

“She’s asleep in Wicked’s room upstairs. We’re going to find Kyle, and this time I’m just going to kill him. You good with that, or you wanna help?”

I pause, my fingers flexing around the phone. “I think I can pass on that, Roy.” I couldn’t keep the sarcastic tone out of my voice.

“I’m just asking, because I get the feeling you’ve been on the receiving end of his sick bullshit more than anyone else, and he took your mom.”

I think over his words. He’s right. I probably have. I’m not sure what my mom would have endured by him, but I gather it would be around the same. If not maybe more.

“It’s not me, Roy. You can handle that, but have you checked on our mom?”

“Yeah, I have. She just thinks he’s away on one of his many business trips. Oblivious. Did she know anything?”

I shake my head even though I know he can’t see me. “No. She didn’t have a clue.”

“Well, we’ll keep it that way.”

“You could just say that his submarine sunk or something,” I jest, leaning back against the couch.

“What? His submarine?”

“He owned a submarine company. How did you not know that?”

Silence. “I didn’t know a lot.” I’m not sure if that was a dig at me or not. I know Royce, and although I have no

reservations on how he feels about me, I also know that he's going to be upset with me about a lot once this is all over. For one, I should have told him from the start. I know for a fact that that's going to be a big fight. I'm drained already. "Where's the launching pad?"

"Well, that's the tricky part."

"Spit it out, Duchess, I'm really not in the fucking mood."

"It's at the naval base. You can't get in without his access card or a military card."

"Stay at the clubhouse. I'm serious, Jade. Don't fucking move from there."

"Okay." *What's another lie.* "Be safe, please?"

He doesn't answer, hanging up and leaving me sitting there with a nervous throb deep in my belly.

Kara stands from the sofa. "They'll be fine. Trust me."

The thing about trust is that it can be broken.

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Royce

We got into the naval base easy enough, with Lion and the pull he has, the cartel were more than happy to help us shift this along faster after learning who K Diamond really is and his connection to Olivia. The man behind the mask. Every time I think over the exchanges between him and me, I find myself getting angry that I hadn't picked up on anything. None of it seems to make sense and right now, I don't have the clarity to decipher any of it.

Four truckloads of some of the deadliest motherfuckers I know, all for a man I grew up with. I called Dad.

Fuck.

Lion stops the car outside the launch station, pulling up the emergency brake and glaring out at the endless ocean. Wicked and the boys who were rolling with us begin piling out of the car, leaving Lion and I alone for the first time since revelations came about.

"I need to tell you something. I knew your father in high school." He took a breath and blew it out. I want to interrupt and ask how and why and what the fuck? But I don't. Not yet. "He was my best friend. It was him, me, a couple other boys and Jenny Smith."

"You didn't think to tell me this?" I say, annoyed that it was kept from me by my damn president.

"I was going to tell you, but Kyle and I decided the less you knew, the better when it came to his history. He played it up, not wanting you to know his dark past. Bullshit, obviously." His eyes come to mine, and I see the way the worry lines curve in when the next words come out of his mouth. "Everything I did was to protect you, son. Nothing more and nothing less."

I nod my head, because I trust him. I trust that even if he had lied to me, I trust that I know he did it with the right interest at heart.

"We were all best fucking friends. You, Wicked, Orson, and Storm reminded me of what we all had. Only our story was a little more rugged than your high school stories. Jenny and Kyle were the couple of the school. They fell in love early and stayed that way right until the night she died. Kyle loved that girl more than he loved anything and anyone in his entire life."

"What happened?"

Lion huffs, his finger tapping on his thigh. "We were drinking at a party one night. On the outskirts. There were trees and loose gravel all over the road. The music was loud, there was laughter. Jenny was on Kyle's lap because there weren't enough seats. I lost control, rolled the car and hit a tree. Jenny died in Kyle's arms. He never recovered from that. I thought he would resent me, but he never did. Never. All this time, he was cooking up some sick shit to get back at me. He put Ollie in my life and then killed her, I have no fucking doubt about that." Lion reaches into his pocket and takes out his leather wallet, flipping open the worn case and handing me a photo. "So when we go in there, we kill him. You understand? Fuck answers. I'm done talking."

I study the photo closely. The woman looks so much like Jade I almost want to hit Lion for not picking up the

resemblance. Her dark hair, square-shaped jaw and swollen lips. I think she looks familiar, but all I can bring it down to is that she looks like Jade now. The photo is old, with obvious discoloration tainting their smiles.

"Yeah, roger that." I hand him back the photo. "You think he put Olivia on your path for a reason?"

He chuckles. "Just so he could tear her away from me."

"Doesn't answer why the fuck he was so hellbent on dragging me to hell with him."

"Could be something as simple as his jealousy over Jade, or it could be something more sinister." His hand goes to the handle, pushing the door open. "Whatever it is, you have about four seconds to figure it out before I go in swinging."

Finding his ship was easy enough, since there was only one submarine docked up in this harbor. The door is open with stairs leading down, with our snipers set up on all four corners of the submarine.

My phone vibrates.

If you're at the base, we're on our way there now. Got a tip. If you haven't already, do it now and leave.

"That was Isaac," I say to Lion, flashing the text to him. "We need to move fast."

"You say that like we aren't carrying an army behind us right now."

The submarine is all steel gray metal, with computers lining the narrow path to the back of the machine. Wicked and a few other boys are behind Lion and me, but I see nothing but fucking red.

Nothing.

Shoving through the back door, Kyle is seated at the front of the ship, swinging around in his chair to face us.

"Well, just when I thought I was getting away..."

My eyes fell to his pants, where blood is seeping through the material.

"Who helped you get here?" I snap, raising my gun up and shooting him in his right arm before he can move.

Kyle roars in pain, Lion coming to the back of his seat with his knife pressing against his throat. "Why did you take Olivia from me?"

"He didn't," a voice says from behind us, and we all shift to see an older woman with dark hair and green eyes enter. She's wearing a white suit, with her hair up in a tight bun on the top of her head.

Lion falls backward, his arms coming to the side. "Ollie?"

Olivia moves forward, her eyes on Lion. "I'm sorry, Lionel. I—I didn't have a choice."

"You're the woman who told me to go to the bar that day..." I whisper absently. *Holy fuck.*

Olivia turns to face me. Having her in front of me is like a slap in the face. She resembles Jade way too much for me to be comfortable with ending her life if she's team fucking Kyle. "I also apologize about the explosion. We had to get him out of there before you all killed him."

"Where the fuck did you come from?" Kyle seethes, spitting onto the ground.

"She was with me," another voice says, and a girl I don't recognize walks through the boys. She's short, petite, with a round face and doe-like eyes. Her hair is dark on the top and blonde on the ends, and her blue eyes are as moody as the ocean. I don't know who she is nor do I recognize her.

The girl turns to face Wicked.

I look between her and Wicked, confused.

"Hey, big brother..."

I freeze.

Wicked's hand comes up to her face, blinking back the tears that are pricking the edges of his eyes. "Poppy?"

"It's me." She smiles up at him, and I see the adoration she has for Wicked as she leans her face into his hand. "I'll explain later."

She turns back to face Kyle, her shoulders squaring, and her lip curled. “You may not know this, Mr. K, but all these years—” Poppy moves around him as Olivia remains near Lion. Probably to ensure he doesn’t kill Kyle. This whole situation is fucked.

“Listen!” I snap, I’ve fucking had it with the delay. “I need fuckin’ blood, so all of you are going to have to wait until I’m done, and then you can wear his organs as a necklace. We good?”

Poppy stares at me blankly. “You must be Royce.” The way she confirms it is enough to have me stop talking. As if she knows more about me than I want her to know. “She spoke about you a lot.”

“Who!” I yell, my fists clenching at my sides.

“Me,” Jade whispers from the doorway, and I spin around in a rush, my teeth bared in anger.

“I fucking told you! What did I say, Jade? I said to keep your ass at the motherfucking clubhouse so I can handle this shit!”

Jade clears her throat, stepping farther toward me while an angelic smile remains passive on her lips. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“What are you doing?” I say, exasperated. If I didn’t love her so damn much, I’d put a bullet between her pretty little eyes just to put myself out of my misery. She has always been the crux of my pain, but around that crux, we had a life together.

“As I was saying, an angel has been working with you for years,” Poppy says, turning to face Kyle.

The blood in Kyle’s face drains, his skin going pale. I’m still standing here, fucking gobsmacked as to what the fuck I’m missing.

“Me,” Jade announces, like she’s fucking bulletproof. She steps closer to Kyle and my hand flies out to connect to hers.

She turns to face me. “Roy, I’ve been through more than you know over the years. Let me handle this. Please.”

There’s an internal battle that pulls in my chest. The me who wants to protect her at all costs and not let anyone go near her ever again, and then there’s the other side. The side that has realized over the past few days just how much she has grown. By the hand of my father, she has endured pain, suffering, and loss, and that’s only from what I know. I know that there’s so much more she has to tell me. But with that pain and suffering came resilience.

I let her hand go, with my other fisted so tight that crescent moons scar my palms.

“Over the years, I’ve been freeing girls,” Jade announces, her shoulders back. Lion takes the few steps it is to me, leaving the girls at the front line. We hang back like hungry wolves, waiting for our alphas to say it’s feeding time.

I’m good with that.

Jade carries on. “The first girl I freed was Poppy. After seeing her the first time you took me to the compound, curled up in the corner crying. I knew right then and there that I would not allow my part in your life to be in vain. I would use it for good.”

Jesus fucking Christ, I want to fuck all that good out of her right now.

Jade leans down, her hands pressed on either side of the chair. “You thought you were so smart, Kyle. But among all of it, you seemed to forget one thing.”

“And what’s that?” Kyle snaps, and I watch as defeat drags out of his eyes.

“I was your blind spot. You conditioned me to sit like a lapdog, which I did. I battled with a lot of guilt inside of me, but there’s always one thing that would outweigh the abuse, and that’s the strength I built. I wanted revenge. I wanted to help these girls. So, one after the other, I freed them before they even made it to the podium. I wish I could have saved them all, but I always went for the younger ones first.” Jade

pushes off the chair. "Poppy got in contact with me the day I started at the university. She said that they had formed an elite group of women, and all of those women were girls I saved over the years." She looks at me over her shoulder. "With the help of some wealthy rich pricks, they have been able to do so much more for survivors." My brain fuzzes. *Anonymous?* She turns back to Kyle. "I agreed to continue when I found out. To play your game until the right time came." She moves to standing. "But then Royce happened, and you stole me."

"You knew about your mom being alive?" I say, teeth clenched. "Trying not to be pissed at you right now, baby, but you're making it real fucking hard."

"Sorry," she whispers, looking at me over her shoulder. "I get that you all have a score to settle with Kyle." She turns to face us all. "Wicked, what he did to you and me, and to Poppy." She moves to Olivia. "My mom, who received the worst of it and then had to further fake her own death while allowing her daughter to bring down the most dangerous man in history. I understand why she didn't tell me Lion was my father. It would have distracted me." Jade folds her arms in front of herself, and I watch as her lip trembles. "I understand the pain he has caused. You all want revenge. But the women who stand behind me, and the many more that there are, are only the tip of this iceberg. We can take the dealer off the streets, but that doesn't remove the drugs." She walks closer to me, and I snarl at her. I already know what she's going to ask of me.

"Royce." Her voice alone has a direct line to every fucking emotion that resides inside of me. "We let them take him. Isaac needs him to bring down the buyers. There were a lot, Roy. Kyle has connections to the biggest trafficking rings not just in America, but the entire world. We owe it to those who have had their innocence stolen from them to do better than just murder."

I shake my head. “Can’t, baby. Can’t let him leave here unless it’s by his skin on my back.”

Her hand comes to my cheek before her fingers flex toward the back of my neck, pulling me down to her.

“You can,” she whispers. “I’m just asking for *not* yet. Let them get what they need. I promise you, promise you, Isaac will get you in. Just—” she sighs, and tears roll down her cheeks. “Let this be about more than revenge. Let this be about change.” All of her pain spills out from her and washes over me.

I soak it up, wanting to take it away from her, knowing damn well that I’m going to give this girl whatever the fuck she wants.

“One month.”

“Six,” she replies simply, her lips over mine.

“Four,” I snap, biting her bottom lip.

She kisses me. “Nine.”

“Fine.” That was the fucking kiss of death. “They got nine months, then he’s mine.”

“Okay.”

Just as the words leave her mouth, Isaac and the feds storm through the submarine. Jade is tucked under my arm as Olivia falls into step beside Lion, rigid and nervous. In a matter of hours, Lion’s world has flip-flopped back and forward. All of us have somehow lost our grip on reality.

Jade climbs into the back of the SUV with Poppy and Wicked, as I shut them inside and make my way to Isaac, who’s watching me near his squad car.

I nudge my head. “How long you been under?”

Isaac shakes his head. “Since she first came in.”

I turn over my shoulder. I can’t see Jade through the tinted glass, but know she’s watching us closely. “Seven months, Isaac. I told her nine, but you got seven months.”

When I turn to face him, his eyes are weak. “I have enough information on most of his clients already, so I’ll only need seven.”

"This underground trafficking issue. She's fucking passionate about it."

Isaac shoves his hands into his pocket. "That girl, Royce, that girl has had the worst of the worst happen to her. I wouldn't worry about her mentally. She's strong. Somehow built a wall to block out the life she had with Kyle, and her young life of being in high school. But tread carefully with her. There were a handful of times when I almost threw the towel in to save her from Kyle, but I didn't. I couldn't."

The thought of Jade being in any kind of trouble is enough to have me seething.

"She said that some of them were kids."

Isaac leans back on his squad car, crossing his legs at the ankles. "Not often. The ones that were passed through were up from their parents for debt, money. The children that she mentioned, they weren't trafficked for sex or slavery. That was for the adoption trade. A lot of rich folks out there who can't have kids and have too much money to wait in line." His hand is on my shoulder, squeezing. "Seven months, you'll receive a text from me. Follow the instructions and you'll get your wish. In the meantime." His eyes went to the van and I followed, that same guilt eating up my stomach. "Be there for your girl, and your mom, man. They're going to need it." He turns to leave and just as I make my way back to the van, I pause in my steps.

"Isaac?" I call out, turning around.

He catches me. "Yes?"

"The tip you got?"

I watch as a smile truly curves up on his mouth. "Well, let's just say it was *Anonymous*."

Fucking hell. Thoughts twist into knots over what and how I'm going to come to terms with not just everything that has unraveled, but handling the one thing I don't think I'm strong enough to deal with.

Guilt.

Jade is the one person on this earth that I would straight-up kill, die, bend, snap, do anything for. She had me at her feet, ready to do whatever she wanted, but what if what she wants is to let me go.

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Jade

I remember feeling fear for the first time in my life. It was when I saw Royce fall off his skateboard and skin his knees so bad that you could see bone. I cried for days because I thought he was going to die.

We're back at the clubhouse an hour later, the realism of everything falling around the SUV like a heavy cloud. No one has spoken a word to each other, and Royce hasn't so much as flinched near me. That same fear I felt when I was a kid, I feel now too. *Please don't leave me.*

Wicked turns the car off and we all pile out, my knees weak and eyes sticky with fatigue. My phone starts ringing in my pocket and I take it out, seeing Sloane's name on the screen.

I swipe it to answer. "Hi."

"Oh my god! I just saw the news."

I gulp past the nerves. Here comes the next part that we will have to live through. The shame. The pity. The "Oh my god, I wonder what he did to her!" All of that doesn't mean anything to me, though.

"I know," is all I manage to say, my throat parched and lips cracked. My skin itches to be washed, my eyes

desperate for sleep.

"Are you okay?" she asks, and I love her for it. The simplicity of Sloane and I's friendship has played a big part in my survival over the years. She helped keep my feet grounded, helped provide a normal life for me when I wasn't with Kyle.

"I will be. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"I love you, Jade."

"I love you too." We both hang up and I take a moment to really look at the damage of the clubhouse. The shooting where Bonnie was standing, the blood on the ground from Kyle being dragged to the back of the house, the wired gates at the front shattered in the explosion.

"Royce," Lion interrupts, but I'm still lost in the midst of the chaos that I don't realize the tears that are streaming down my cheeks. "Take her home and come back tomorrow."

Royce is by my side, his hand in mine as he directs me toward his car. "Come on."

Wicked calls out as I slide into the passenger seat. "We'll catch a ride."

Forgetting that Wicked has been living with Royce, I slip the belt on across my chest and rest my forehead on the cool window. My arms are around my torso protectively, my lips trembling. It's over. I don't trust those words, even though my muscles relax at the thought. I don't trust that he's not going to escape and chase me, throwing me back into his world.

Car doors close behind me.

The V8 rumbles beneath my seat.

I close my eyes and blindly reach for the radio. I want to talk to Poppy, but right now I need nothing but music to fill the empty parts of myself. Music is the only thing powerful enough to fill the voids in your soul. Music is the language of healing, as Seether "I'll Survive" plays through the speakers.

We arrive back to the cabin just under an hour later. Walking through the wooden doors was like coming home for the first time. I kick off my shoes near the door and begin undressing out of, tossing my clothes before I've even hit the hallway that leads to the bedrooms.

"Ahhh," Royce says from somewhere behind me. "I get that Wicked has seen you in every which way, but we're still going to need boundaries."

I ignore him, heading straight for his bedroom and falling onto his bed. I know I should shower. I smell of death. But before I can fight with myself to get up, my eyes are already closed and darkness is taking hold.

My phone says 3:04 a.m. Three a.m. Swinging my legs over the bed while trying not to wake a sleeping Royce, I pad to the bathroom and turn on the shower. The whole wall is glass, which overlooks the ocean with a claw-foot tub sitting in the middle of the room. There's a rainforest shower behind with no walls or curtains, the bathroom sink is floating, bolted to the wall. I have to text India and give her props on the décor of his house. Her small touches made it feel like a home.

Tossing my clothes into the corner, I step into the shower and sigh as the hot water pelts down over my skin. The water at my feet slowly turns brown as the day washes off of me. Squeezing soap and rubbing it into my skin, I rinse it off before working on my hair—thankful that Royce actually has decent shampoo and conditioner. Pretty boy.

Hands are on either side of my head, caging me against the wall just as I'm washing out the rest of the conditioner from my hair. His lips brush the skin where my neck meets my arm. "Pretty fucking mad at you right now, Duchess."

"Ditto," I murmur, flicking my hair over my shoulder nonchalantly.

His hand is on my lower stomach, pressing my ass into him, his cock against my back. He wraps my hair around his

fist and yanks my head to the side. "Yeah?" he growls, biting at my neck. His lips come to my earlobe. "Show me."

He spins me around and slams me up against the wall, his hand on my throat. I lick my lips, looking up at him from under my lashes. "Spit on me."

The corner of his mouth kicks up in a smirk. "Was wondering when you'd demand that." He leans down, licking me from my jaw, up past my cheek. "When I want to." He lifts me from my ass and lowers me onto his dick. I moan, my fingernails digging into his shoulders as his other hand comes behind my neck and squeezes tightly. He pumps in and out, until the sound of us fucking fills the air. His mouth is on mine, our tongues intertwined. My back scrapes against the wall as his fingers bite into my skin. He drops my feet back to the ground, his hand still secure around my throat as he directs me down onto my knees. His tongue curls out, a smirk on his lips as he spits on my face as I reach for his cock. Interrupting my ideas, he pushes me all the way down to the ground and climbs on top of me, slipping back between my thighs.

He rides my body hard, my legs clenching around his waist. His fingers come up to my chin, clenching my cheeks tight as his cock hits every nerve inside of me. He spits on my face again and I fall apart, my orgasm ripping through my body in savage tremors.

He continues, slowing the pace. Working my body past the point where I thought I couldn't go further. I feel myself building as his hand comes to my cheek and he slaps me gently across the cheek. "Don't fucking come until I say. I gave you that one."

He leans down and catches my lower lip between his teeth, bringing my leg up to flex straight against his chest while pressing my other wide. With both hands handled on me, he grips my body and slams me against his cock.

I scream out, the pleasure and pain threshold damn near overflowing. His mouth is on my leg, his teeth sinking into

my flesh, drawing blood as he continues to move my body into his relentlessly. So strong. So good. His hands are at my hips, biting into them and flipping me over to my belly as water pelts down. He raises me to my knees and slaps me across the ass hard. "No more lies, Duchess..."

A painful scream rips out of me. "Okay!"

He slaps me again. "What?" I can hear the chuckle he's hiding in his tone.

He pumps me a few times and I clench around his girth. He pulls out and yanks me backward until I'm sitting on him reverse, one hand at the front of my throat. I ride him hard, so close to catching the release my body needs. He squeezes again, turning me around and laying back on top of me, his hand back at my chin and his body riding against mine. My clit swells, everything inside of me threatens to explode.

"Slap me." My nails dig into his back, scratching down over his tatted ribs.

He snickers so low it vibrates over my neck as he raises his head, his eyes coming to mine. His hand flies across my cheek just as he dives inside of me roughly, his other hand on the side of my face to hold him up.

"Harder," I plead, my legs clenching around his waist.

"Fuck me, Jade." He knows how I like it and how I need it. *He knows.*

I scream at him, so close and near that I'm seconds away from releasing. "Royce!" I scream. "Please."

His hand comes to my chin, his fingers squeezing as he slows his pace down, riding me hard and slow. His pelvic bone rubs over my clit as soft growls escape me. "Royce."

"Shut the fuck up, Duchess!" he snaps at me, his fingers tightening around my cheeks. "Look at me."

I don't. I just need him to slap me. To hurt me.

He yanks my face. "Look at me right the fuck now."

I do, slowly my eyes lock on to his and my stomach flips, my heart swelling. Overcome with emotion, tears prick my

eyes. He continues to pump inside of me. Not gentle, but slow. "Royce, I get emotional if I can't come."

He smiles, flashing his white teeth. "You don't need that shit with me. You hear?"

"I know I don't! I just like it."

He shakes his head, dropping down onto his elbow so he's directly on top of me now, his lips on mine. "I won't fucking hit here again." He bites on my cheek so hard I know it's going to bruise. "I'll do other shit, but I won't slap you again. Unless it's on your ass. Deal?"

My arm wraps around his neck. "Deal."

He rolls over, grinding inside of me, his lips on mine, his tongue down my throat. He flicks my tongue with his, nibbles on my lip, but never breaks contact. "Let go, baby."

I do, as he empties himself inside of me through harsh pulses.

He falls down beside me as we catch our breath.

"Jesus..."

"I actually think we might kill each other in bed one day, and I am not joking." He chuckles, standing back up.

"Most likely." I crawl up slowly, slipping back beneath the water and washing myself quickly again before turning the faucet off.

"Duchess." His words stop me in my tracks, just as I reach for the towel and wrap it around my body. I watch him through the mirror as he drinks me in with his eyes. They come back to mine. "We do need to talk."

"I know." I squeeze the excess water from my hair, twisting it into a bun and clipping it to my scalp. "I'm hungry, though."

After he grabbed some snacks, I shrugged on his Wolf Pack MC t-shirt while he stayed partially naked. Laying on top of his covers, the early morning sun sets the sky to flames with a soft burnt orange hue behind me. It's comforting to have the warmth of the sun on my back after everything that has happened.

He reaches up and runs his thumb over my bottom lip. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry I left. At the time, I thought I was doing it to save you, but I ended up hurting you."

"Royce, it's not your fault." I sigh, running my fingertips through my hair and resting my head on the palm of my hand. "I could have told you when you came home. I guess we were both doing things we thought were right for the other person."

Royce smiles. "Yeah. I guess." His thumb slips between my lips and I would roll my eyes at the sexual context of it if I knew it wouldn't turn him on. "Gotta ask you something and I need you to be honest with me."

I nod.

"You thinking of running from me anytime soon?"

I shake my head, biting down on his thumb.

"Good."

"Why?" I ask once his thumb is out.

He shrugs. "Don't feel like chasing, and I will chase you if you run."

I reach for the pack of potato chips that are near him, popping it open and chewing. "I hope they find all of his clients."

"They will," Royce says, looking up at the ceiling. He looks to the side, his eyes coming back to mine. "You know how many people's lives you changed doing what you did?"

Sucking the salt off my thumb, I smile sadly. "Wish I could have saved more."

He pulls me into his chest, pressing his lips against my head. "You know what you're going to do with college?"

"Yeah," I say, tossing the bag of chips onto the floor. "I'm going to get my medical degree for Bonnie."

"Mmmm," Royce says, pulling me farther into his arms. As a brother, he kept me safe, but as a lover, he keeps me sane. "Royce?"

"Yeah?" he murmurs into my hair.

“What are we?” It’s a question I should have been thinking about a lot more often than I have.

Silence. His shoulders are shaking and it’s not until I pull away from him slightly and glare up at him from below that I realize he’s laughing.

“What’s funny!” I shove him.

“Oh nothing,” he says casually. “It’s just amusing that you think you’ll ever have a life outside of me.”

“That’s not helpful, Royce...” I grumble.

His arm slips between our bodies, his finger hooking under my chin to tilt my face up to his. “You’re mine, Duchess. In every fucking way that is possible for a woman to be owned by a man. You’re mine.”

“Like, girlfriend, or like, old lady, or fiancée?”

His eyes close as he attempts to contain his laugh.

I shove him again. “Shut up, Roy! Your world is weird.”

His voice is hoarse from his laughing, his hard chest against mine. “Jade.” He kisses me. “All of the above.”

My insides melt.



Royce

Wish I could say I never thought I'd have Jade sitting on my lap, all wrapped up in me, but I'd be lying. Her and I, it was inevitable. Bound to happen, it was just a matter of when time matched fate.

Jade leans forward, placing the cards down onto the table and scooping up all of Lion's money. "I should have mentioned I was good at this..."

"You get it from me," Lion says, a proud smile on his face. It has been two weeks since Kyle has been put away, and I'm itchy as fuck to get my hands on him. I've thought of a thousand different ways I can kill him, and I know how I'm going to do it. *I fucking know.* My mom has been busying herself with renovations of our family house to keep her mind off the fact that my dad turned out to be who he was. Jade and I are driving down tomorrow to stay with her for a bit. Keep her company. She has been drinking and struggling with the guilt of Jade, too, and I think it might offer her some kind of closure if she and Jade sit down to talk.

Seeing Lion with Olivia was weird at first, soon after Bonnie passed. But if he feels even half of what I feel for

Jade, then I get it. I understand it. Bonnie was important to him and the club, but Olivia is his Jade, and besides that, Jade gets to know her mom and dad. Together. After everything that she has been through, she deserves that. Bits were blurry as to how Jade came about in our house until Ollie cleared it up. Ollie had to keep her death story so that they could allow the plan to wash out. I also figure Ollie is, if not the, runner of Anonymous. She hasn't admitted it, and probably won't ever, but what she has been through and the way she carries herself with confidence reminds me of someone who leads an army, not a lost woman broken on the inside. I'd never tell Lion this, but Jade obviously gets her strength and heart from her mom. She had been tailing us for years, watching over Jade. When she gave birth to her, Kyle instantly had her 'killed.' He failed because Isaac helped her escape. I get the feeling that her story is a dark one, with the years unaccounted for before she joined forces with Poppy and the rest of the girls who Jade released.

Speaking of Poppy, Wicked hasn't let her out of his sight. At all. Motherfucker is hella protective over her. It's not helping that she's attractive, and you put someone like Poppy around men like Gypsy and you're going to have yourself a problem, despite the fact that Silver and he have been fucking around behind Fury's back. They can fool Fury, but I see it all over their smug little faces.

Jade leans forward and ruffles Lion's hair. "We can work on getting you better."

Lion gazes at Olivia, shaking his head. "She's a smart-ass like you."

Olivia laughs. "Oh, I'm sure of it."



Jade

Today is the day we bury Bonnie James. My heart is soft and my pain raw. Bonnie was the first woman who made me feel like I belonged here, a friend. I look over the few texts she had sent me while she was alive and I can't stop thinking about how fragile life is. We never know when the end is near, we just have to live each day in oblivion and wait for fate to show up on our doorstep with a bouquet of flowers hanging over its scythe.

After I've climbed onto Royce's bike, I press a kiss on the back of his neck, his hand on mine at his stomach. The bikes all roar together, pulsing loudly down the empty street as he kicks off and we begin our travel together for one last ride before burying her behind the clubhouse. Ollie is on the back with Lion, they are riding directly in front of us, and Wicked slightly to the right of Royce and I, with Gypsy on the other side of Wicked. I've come to learn that how they ride is their position in the club. A club that has become more family to me than I ever could think possible.

Wind claps over my skin, my hair flying out behind my body as Royce zips us forward, following the hearse onto the main highway that leads to Bonnie's old neighborhood.

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Thirty-Eight

Royce

“Royce, I’m fine,” Mom says, patting my hand on her shoulder. She gazes absently out to the back lawn as her new little lapdog runs circles around the basketball court. Orson, Storm, Sloane, and Storm and Orson’s wives are here, with India, Orson’s wife pregnant with their second child. Jade and I arrived at Mom’s a couple days ago when Orson and Storm announced they were coming over. Naturally, that meant Sloane had to be here too. Mom isn’t okay. She’s fighting an uphill battle and only tends to react to Jade. I get it. Jade was the child who was always here, or maybe Mom thinks she owes her something. No one could have known how dark Kyle Kane was. No one. He hid it well. They all do. People expect monsters to come in nightmares, while forgetting to protect their dreams.

“Give it to Uncle Roy!” Orson’s little boy, Timmy, starts bouncing the ball over to me, passing India, Sloane, Jade, and Storm’s girlfriend, Lisa. She might be a bigger nerd than Storm.

I scoop up the little man in my arms and bounce him on my knee, grinning up at Orson and Storm as Mom walks out

to place crackers and drinks over the outdoor dining table. “Who’s your favorite uncle?”

Timmy looks to his father, back to me, and then to Storm. He comes back to me and points. I grin, pointing to myself. “Me?”

He lets out his infectious giggle, his little head leaning back to laugh. I tickle his tummy before setting him back to his feet where he runs off to play with Mom’s little rat dog.

“You’re good with kids, Roy,” Sloane teases, and I turn toward all of them where Jade is staring at me blankly.

“Shut up, Sloane.”

“Welcome,” she sasses, popping a carrot stick in her mouth while bringing her glasses down over her eyes. Careful who you fall in love with, every girl has a crazy best friend. And if she doesn’t? She is the crazy best friend.

“Come here,” I mouth to Jade, who shuffles around the table and takes a seat on my lap. She has that same vacant look in her eyes that she had while watching me with Timmy. I curl her legs over mine and bring my lips to her ear so only she can hear me. “Are you pregnant?”

Nine Months Later

Today is a good day to die if your name is Kyle Kane. Isaac came through around the seven-month mark and told me he needed more time with delivering Kyle. They managed to bring down two other large rings globally and have now started a force specifically to target trafficking. People think this only happens in third world countries, but it doesn’t.

Taking the steps down to the basement of Allure, I crank my neck sideways until all the tiny bones in it crack.

Wicked is behind me, with Lion close behind. It’s us. Us and Kyle Kane.

We all enter the room and I remove my MC cut, placing it onto the counter that’s on the other side of the room.

Closing my eyes and counting to ten.

I find Lion and Wicked. "Ready?"

Wicked nods his head.

Lion smirks.

Wicked moves closer to Kyle, where he's tied and seated on a single chair in the middle of the room. Kyle's screams pierce the room as Wicked moves forward. I hit the sound dock that's on the counter, connecting to my phone's Bluetooth and cranking the sound up so loudly the angry metal of "Walk with Me in Hell" from Lamb of God electrifies the energy into the room. Leaning back on the counter, I watch as Wicked works his magic. The art with which Wicked kills isn't for the fainthearted, but he's not killing Kyle. He's just making the final moments Kyle has breathing on this earth the most excruciating minutes he would ever feel. We settled on Wicked's torture, Lion's wrath, and my signature. Adrenaline pulses through my veins as I remain steady on the other side of the room, Wicked picking up a screw from a toolbox to the side of Kyle and bringing it to the front. He pulls out a hammer, and nails Kyle's foot into the ground. The veins in Kyle's neck pop out angrily, his flesh bright red. Wicked doesn't stop. He continues to move around Kyle, hammering nails into all sides of his body. This is personal for Wicked. It's personal for all of us.

I hit repeat on the song as Wicked finishes by removing each of Kyle's teeth, blood spilling out over his mouth. He is under strict orders to not kill Kyle, that's on me, so he's had to work around death, make death feel like the endgame. Kyle isn't so lucky.

Lion moves forward next once Wicked steps away, his eyes blank and teeth bared.

I smirk, taking a cigarette out of my pocket and lighting the end. Lion doesn't fuck around, and excitement fills me when I feel how close I am to finally getting what I want.

What I've dreamed.

Lion's take is simple. His knife goes between Kyle's legs, cutting across roughly and slicing his balls and cock clean off. A cackle of laughter bursts out of me behind the screaming music, my head tilting back. *Oh sweet fucking victory.* Kyle's head hunches over now, the pain clearly unbearable. I kick off the counter and take the steps I need to reach him.

Pulling my knife out of the back of my jeans, I flick it around my fingers, coming close to Kyle's face, a cigarette hanging from my mouth. His eyes peel open softly, blood leaking from the edges. I will be the last thing he sees before he dies. Me. Bringing my knife below the bottom of his ear, I slowly slide the blade down his flesh and watch as it splits open, blood spilling from the wound. Continuing down unfazed, I take my cigarette out of my mouth with one hand, while dragging the tip of my blade down the whole half of his body. Over the middle of his palm, under his arms, over his ribs, down the side of his legs and continue all the way down around the top of his feet and up his inner thigh. Once I reach where Lion cut off his dick, I sink my blade over his raw wound over to his other thigh, down and tracing the same pattern I did on the other side until I'm near his ear. Blood and fluid spills out from him, but his eyes are still on mine, his mouth open and blood dripping out. He's barely alive, and maybe under any other circumstances, he would be dead. Circumstances that wouldn't involve Wicked using some sort of acupuncture to keep him alive for as long as possible.

I don't stop, finally dragging my blade up the thin skin of his scalp, over to the other side to my starting point. Once the cut is joined, I drop my knife, placing my cigarette into my mouth and curl my fingers beneath the flesh of his scalp. Brain matter seeps between my fingers as I slowly peel the flesh from his body. The face is the hardest, separating such thin skin from muscles and fatty tissue. Ripping down roughly, I pull the flesh from his body in five

minutes flat, my cigarette falling to the bloodied ground, where his skin now lays with the rest of his organs and fluid in a pool at his feet.

Wicked turns off the music finally, and that's when I hear the deep breaths I'm inhaling and exhaling.

"Jesus," Lion murmurs. "Seeing you rip is something I will never get used to."

I turn to face the two of them, my lips curled and my brain frantic. The adrenaline that pulses through me after ripping is addictive. I wish I could say I try not to go there when I kill, but give me the chance and I'll take it.

"We'll send in the cleanup crew," Lion says, reaching forward and pressing his finger into the flaming red muscle in Kyle's thigh. He scrunches his face. "You're a sick bastard. You know that, right?"

I smirk, running my tongue over my lips and swallowing the blood that had fallen. "One would say a Sicko."

My phone vibrates in my jean pocket and I fish it out. "Hey, baby."

"Roy," she breathes into the phone. "I'm in labor."



Jade

One year later

The sun sets off in the distance, ducking behind one of the many mountains that are on the edge of the ocean at what is now our cabin. The MC, our families, and close friends are over for dinner. Meat is grilling on the BBQ in the far distance, while people are scattered around the place, drinking and chatting. Royce has our princess on his lap near the fire pit, his eyes on mine as she clings to his index finger happily. My heart fills with warmth seeing them together. I will never get used to it. The night I went into labor, I was at the clubhouse helping my mom and Kara set the food up for the hog feast that was happening. Another chapter was in town, so naturally they were crashing at the club. My water broke right there in the kitchen. My doctor said that I'd have enough time to make it to the hospital, so I needn't worry.

She was wrong.

I gave birth to Wolf Jade Kane exactly ten minutes after my water broke. We didn't have time to get out of the house

before I was giving birth to her on Wolf Pack soil. Made her papa proud, and her grandpa even more so.

Royce kisses the top of her blonde hair, her green eyes coming to mine from across the table.

"You know, you're both in so much trouble with her," Sloane says, sitting on one of the chairs beside me as Orson and Storm prepare the boat, tossing the wakeboards and life jackets on.

"Oh, I know," I say, smiling. "But look at how bad she has wrapped her daddy around her fingers."

"Mmmhmmm," Sloane jokes. "Not just your daddy. Now you have to share him."

I roll my eyes at her lame joke just as Royce comes over, handing Wolf to Sloane. "You wanna come out for a shred?"

I shake my head. "I'm good." I haven't been out since I gave birth to Wolf. There's no way I'm going out tonight, after a few beers.

"You sure?" He leans down, his arms bulging as he squeezes the side of my chair. "You were always keen for a ride on my board."

I shove him. "Go play. I'll stay here."

"Alright, baby." He kisses me on the head before planting one on Wolf and disappearing toward the dock.

"You two are so cute it's disturbing, yet oddly satisfying," Sloane says, kicking her feet up to rest on a log, just as Kara, Karli, Silver, Poppy and my mom and dad make their way over.

"I think it was bound to happen." India shoves my shoulder, the playful tone in her voice evident while taking the seat beside me.

I chuckle, my head leaning back, watching as all the brothers scatter everywhere, drinking and eating the food that we prepared all day. This is my family and what family feels like.

"What you thinking, baby girl?" Dad asks, taking his pride and joy off Sloane.

I sigh. "Just that life couldn't get much better than what it is right now."

Poppy drops down onto the chair opposite me, with Wicked hovering not far behind her. That man is just like Royce when it comes to Poppy. I scoff to myself, thinking of the obvious crush Gypsy has on her. In his dreams. When Wicked moves closer to her, Billie follows.

Poppy and I have spoken a lot since everything went down. She filled me in on the blank parts and offered me a position within Anonymous. The boys don't know that she's in Anon. I think they suspect something, but they can't prove it. Mom leads that group of women like a fierce queen. They're now working closely with Isaac too while using Storm and Slim when they need anything tracked, coded, or wiped.

"Well, this is your life now, princess. Take it," Dad announces, a grin on his mouth. I smile at him, and up at everyone that's here.

He's right.

I will take it.

"Baby!" Royce yells from behind me.

I spin around, eyes wide. "What?"

He tosses a basketball at me and I catch it with a thud as he takes long strides toward me. My fingers twitch over a lump that's taped to the ball. I still, my stomach dropping to the ground when I see the white gold diamond ring that's glistening against the burned orange sun.

"Ro—"

"Shhh." His finger is at my mouth, a smirk on his. "Stop fucking talking for a second."

"Okay," I whisper, my throat throbbing from emotion.

He falls to one knee, a cocky smirk on his mouth as his eyes peer up at me from below. "Jade Olivia Kane, I can't wait to fuck you, love you, and eat you for the rest of our life. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," I say through choked tears, my hands coming to his cheeks.

"Oh, come on. Really?" Dad says. "Little fuck."

We all start laughing as Royce scoops me up from the backs of my legs and throws me over his shoulder.

If I had to walk through hell all over again just to have my man finally beneath me, I'd do it one hundred times over. One hundred. Royce was my family before anyone else was. He and Mom invited me into their hearts and made me feel like the missing piece to their family. Sometimes it's not about blood.

It's about who is still standing beside you after seeing you at your worst.

I will love this man for the rest of my life, and when we both finally die, our souls will continue to find each other wherever we end up.

Because you can't fuck with fate.

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