



DESCENT

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Descent

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Were he not a supreme scoundrel, he would be a great man.

-George Templeton Strong

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Chapter One

Hallie

“One more round!”

As my best friend orders up another round—on me—I look at the fruity drink in front of me that I haven’t even finished yet.

It’s my fault. I’m not a fast drinker. Charity could drink a brawny old biker under the table, but when I drink, I tend to pace myself.

“Come on,” she says, her butt hitting the chair as she sits back down and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Why are you still on your first drink? It’s a bachelorette party, for fuck’s sake.”

“This is my second drink,” I tell her, though I can see it doesn’t make a bit of difference. “And I know it’s your bachelorette party, that’s why I’m at this loud-ass bar to begin with.”

When we were younger, I enjoyed going out drinking with Charity, but as I approach 26, I’m finding the whole scene a little tired. If I’m being honest, I would have preferred to spend the evening at home in my pajamas, curled up on the couch with my cat.

Even in twenty years, I doubt that will be Charity’s idea of a good time, so instead we’re taking a party bus from bar to bar. This is our first stop, and I think Charity is starting to get bored of the place.

“We need to get you a man,” Charity says off-handedly, like it’s a to-do list item she just remembered to bring up.

“We don’t,” I disagree.

“We do.” She signals the bartender, and he runs right over to get her a shot while we wait for that second round. She throws it back like a champ,

then brings the glass down on the bar top with a hard thud. Looking over at me, she says, “I’ve got just the guy for you. When I get back from Bermuda, I’m gonna set you two up.”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes her thought. We have gone down this road before, and Charity’s idea of the man I need and *my* idea of the kind of man I need do *not* line up. “I appreciate the sentiment, but really, I’m good.”

“I know that last guy didn’t turn out so great,” she acknowledges.

Recalling how rude he was to the waiter and the bathroom break he took which resulted in him returning to the table with white powder residue beneath his nose, my lips thin. “No, it sure didn’t.”

Undeterred, she goes on, “But if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

“An excellent mentality in most cases, but honestly, I’m fine hanging out with Marie and my own company for right now.”

“I feel like you’re afraid to get back out there.”

“I am definitely not afraid to get back out there,” I assure her. “Fatigued, maybe, but not afraid.”

Nodding with remarkable solemnity for an almost-drunk girl, she says, “I get that. I do. Dating can be exhausting when you’re actually *trying* to find someone to settle down with. But I know you, babe. You’re not meant to spend your days with Marie. She’s a lovely cat, sure, but you are a relationship girl. You’re the marrying kind. You are not a future cat lady spinster. You’re just not.”

Sighing, I grab my drink and take a slow sip. “No, that’s not how I see my life going, but honestly, I’d rather *be* a cat lady spinster than date someone who makes me feel...” I pause, trying to encapsulate the feelings I’ve been left with after every failed relationship. Finally, I come up with, “unfulfilled.”

“I don’t want that for you, either,” she says. “But you *won’t* feel that way with the right guy. I don’t feel that way with Tyler, and I’m *not* the marrying kind. If I can find that, you sure as hell can.”

I shrug. “Maybe someday. It’s just not my turn yet, and I’m fine with that.”

Charity shakes her head. “It will never be your turn if you never go out with anybody. Let me set you up. I know the guys I pick for you aren’t usually your first choice, but sometimes the most perfect person for you is someone you never thought to consider.”

I cannot stomach the idea of going out with another of Charity’s picks. I also seldom win arguments with my professional lawyer bestie, so rather than engage, I lean forward and look down the bar. Surely shiny new drinks will distract her.

“And I know, I shouldn’t try to run your life for you,” she says, even though I haven’t said a word. “I promise to get better about that as long as *you* get better about stepping outside your comfort zone and taking chances from time to time. It can lead you somewhere really unexpected, but really good. Look at me. Party girl extraordinaire. I took a chance and stepped outside my comfort zone with Tyler, and now we’re getting married tomorrow. *Me*. Married. Who ever thought you would be the maid of honor at *my* wedding before I got to be yours?”

It’s true, between the two of us, I am the more romantic. I’m the one who actually *hoped* to find someone to share my life with, while Charity was more about just having fun. No one expected her to get married anytime soon, but then Tyler came along and changed the game.

I’m happy for them, and I *would* like to find that special someone for myself, but I’m so sick of dating. It’s exhausting chasing dead-end after dead-end, trying again and again to find someone to connect with and being disappointed every damn time.

After my last hollow relationship, I’m content to be single for a while. I need to recharge, take a little time to myself before I’ll have the energy to dive back into the dating pool again.

My phone buzzes. As if the universe is eavesdropping on our conversation and wants to contribute, the name of my most recent ex-boyfriend pops up on the screen.

Charity grabs my phone. “Ew. Why is Jackson texting you?” Eyes wide, she looks up at me. “I’m over here trying to set you up and here you are...” She trails off as she opens the text message to read it for herself. “Tell me you are not drunk-texting this hopeless asshole.”

“How could I drunk-text anyone? I’m not even drunk.” I snatch my phone from her. “And no, I didn’t text him.” Frowning faintly, I open the text to see what Jackson wants.

The message reads, “I need to see you.”

“Don’t you dare text him back,” Charity says. “You dumped him. It’s over. He sucks. *C’est la fucking vie.*”

My grip on the phone tightens almost protectively as I text him back to ask what’s wrong.

I can’t be like Charity when it comes to things like this. She has dumped plenty of guys over the years, so it’s nothing to her. Like ripping off a Band-aid. Jackson is only the second guy I’ve ever dumped in my whole life, and I let the relationship drag on for three months past the time of death hoping to avoid it. I don’t like being dumped, either, but I would’ve preferred if he got bored and dumped me instead of making *me* dump *him*.

It didn’t work, though. Jackson is a workaholic. I’m not even sure he noticed I pulled back until a couple of weeks before I finally got up the nerve to end things.

Honestly, I didn’t think he would be too bummed about it by the time it happened. We hardly even saw each other anymore. We texted a few times a week, but even that wasn’t daily anymore. We were barely together, hanging by a thread. I didn’t think he would care when I finally snapped it.

In the moment, it didn’t seem like he did. He seemed stunned, but not sad. I think his ego took a bigger hit than his heart. Jackson is successful

and attractive. People like him, and he's just not the kind of guy a lot of women dump.

For me, though... there was always something missing with him. Our whole relationship felt almost rehearsed, like a scene he'd run through with countless other women. There was nothing special or personal about it.

We didn't connect on any deeper level, we just spent time together. It didn't even feel like *spending* time together, really, it felt like *passing* time in the same vicinity as one another.

It wasn't what I wanted. Since I knew we couldn't meet one another's needs, I finally called it.

I suppose because there was no big dramatic end, no final incident to pound the nail into the coffin of our relationship, it came as a shock to Jackson. I also don't think he's ever really been told no—by a woman, at least—and he responded as if I'd spoken to him in tongues.

Once the shock passed, he started texting me again. Wanting to know why—was there someone else? There had to be someone else, right? Why wouldn't I just admit there was someone else?

He got a little pushy about it, needing to believe this scenario he'd made up entirely in his own head to explain why I didn't want to be with him anymore, so I finally stopped responding to his messages altogether.

It has been weeks since I last heard from him, and given the tone of this first message he's sending me tonight, I am not excited to hear from him again. Dread churns in my gut as another text from him pops up.

This one reads, "What if no one ever loves me?"

I sigh, reaching for my drink and taking a big gulp. Then I text him back, "That's absurd, Jackson. You just haven't met the right girl yet, that's all."

"I thought I had," he responds.

I try not to feel guilty, but it's hard.

I remind myself it's no one's fault if two people are poorly matched. It's better we acknowledged it and let each other go so both of us would have a better shot at finding happiness elsewhere.

Besides, if the way he treated me was the level of attentiveness he would devote to "the one," then I feel a little sorry for anyone who *is* meant for him.

Another text comes through. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

I'm less sure about how to answer this one. I text back, "You don't have to be alone. Meet up with some friends, go out."

"I'm already out. I need to see you. Please, you owe me this much."

He almost had me until that last part. I make a face at my phone, instantly turned off.

I don't owe him shit.

We dated and then we stopped because it wasn't a good fit. The end.

I owe him.

He's got some fucking nerve.

To put a swift end to this interaction, I shoot him one last text. "I can't meet you tonight. I'm at Charity's bachelorette party. And I don't owe you anything, Jackson. I'm sorry it didn't work out, but it didn't, and that's no one's fault. I'm not interested in rekindling anything, ever. I hope you find someone that fits you better than I did and that you'll both be very happy together. Good night."

To avoid the temptation of further engaging with him, I open the flap of my pink leather purse and slide my phone inside.

There.

No more Jackson.

This is Charity's night.

As the night wears on, I drink until I am a little past tipsy.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Charity, even though I doubt she cares. She’s busy flirting with the cute bartender.

I stumble and giggle a bit as I get off the stool and steady myself. After blinking a few times, I make my way through the crowd to the cramped restroom.

While I’m peeing, I get the bright idea to dig out my phone and see if I have any missed notifications.

There are several from Jackson. The longer I ignored him, the angrier he got until he finally stopped texting me. He started again, though, about ten minutes ago.

Since I’m a bit drunk, I finally answer this one. “Omg what?”

“Where are you?” he asks.

“Out with Charity, I told you.”

“I need your help, Hallie. I got into some trouble.”

Sobering just a bit, I try harder to focus on the screen. I squint, then close one eye and type back, “What kind of trouble?”

“I need you to meet me. I’ll make it worth your while, I promise. I’ll pay you back tomorrow, but I’m in big trouble. Please come, I’m fucked if you don’t.”

“What kind of trouble are you in?”

“I’m out with my boss and some of his friends.”

That’s not an answer. Sighing, I tuck the phone back in my bag so I can get out of the tiny bathroom stall. As I’m standing at the sink washing my

hands, I hear my phone vibrating more insistently than it would for a text message.

Someone's *calling* me?

I grab a paper towel and quickly dry my hands, then I dig my phone back out.

The number flashing across the screen is Jackson's, so I expect to hear his voice when I pick up the phone.

It's not Jackson.

"Hello, Hallie."

The deep, unfamiliar voice of the man on the other end gives me pause.

I respond uncertainly, "Who is this?"

"I'm sending a car for you," he says, not answering my question. "Where are you?"

My heart sinks. I'm not even sure why, but there's such authority in the man's tone, it doesn't even cross my mind that I could simply tell him to fuck off, that I'm not leaving my friend's bachelorette party for reasons still entirely unknown to me.

Instead, I stumble out of the bathroom, trying to pull myself together as I make my way outside to see where I am.

This is our third bar of the night; I have no idea where we are.

"Is everything okay?" I ask since this man called me from Jackson's phone. "Is Jackson all right?"

"For the moment," the man says evasively.

My heart jumps to my throat at the implication that he might not be for much longer. "Did Jackson... get into trouble? Are you his friend, or...?"

Or what? Do I really think some bad guy who put him in peril would want to chat with me on the phone?

“We’ll discuss that when you get here,” he tells me, his firm, decisive tone brooking no arguments.

“I’m not sure what I can do to help,” I say, growing more anxious as I near the door. In the texts Jackson sent before this man called, it seemed like he needed to borrow money, but I don’t understand why. Jackson has significantly more money than I have. The only thing I can even rationalize is that for some reason he can’t access his own funds right now, but if he’s out with friends, why can’t one of them help him?

The bouncer looks my way as I burst out of the club. It occurs to me belatedly that maybe I should’ve told someone before I left. I’m not sure I’ll be able to get right back in. There’s a line to get into the club, and I don’t want to have to wait to go back inside.

I look up and tell the man on the other end of the call the name of the club I’m at.

I did it because he told me to and I’m bad at falling short of people’s expectations of me, but as I stand alone on the sidewalk outside the noisy club, it occurs to me... I could be putting myself into danger if I get into this stranger’s car.

I don’t want Jackson to be in trouble, but I don’t want to endanger myself for him, either. If Jackson did something stupid and now he’s in trouble for it, that was his choice. I’m not even his girlfriend anymore; it’s certainly not my job to bail him out.

I don’t *really* believe he would deliberately put me in danger, though. He may have been a crappy boyfriend, but surely he’s not that much of an asshole.

Once I’ve told the man on the phone which club I’m at, I try to go back through the door I exited out of, but it turns out it doesn’t go both ways.

Shit.

I walk over near the bouncer and lean over the rope to get his attention. “Excuse me.” His hard gaze meets mine. “Hi. Um, I was inside with my girlfriends, it’s my best friend’s bachelorette party—I’m the maid of honor. I had to step outside to take a phone call, but now I need to go back in and tell my friend I have to leave. Can I slip back inside real quick?”

He shakes his head. “No can do.”

“But... I’ll only be two minutes. I just need to run in and tell my friend —”

“If you want to get back through this door, you’ll have to wait in line like everybody else.”

Shit.

“All right. Thank you,” I murmur.

I turn around to face the road, sighing into the phone still pressed against my ear.

The line has been silent for so long, I half-expected the man on the other end had hung up and I just hadn’t noticed, so I’m surprised when he suddenly speaks again.

“Do you typically thank people for giving you an answer you don’t like?”

Frowning faintly at his question, I explain, “I was being polite.”

“Was he?”

“He was only doing his job. I’m the one who walked outside without thinking to ask if I’d be allowed back in.”

“So it’s your fault,” he murmurs, sounding more interested than I would expect him to.

“Actually, it’s yours,” I tell him.

He sounds surprised. “Mine?”

I nod, forgetting he can't see me. "You called me on the phone—who does that but psychopaths? And you sounded so bossy, I was unnerved. Ordinarily, I would've asked before I exited if I needed a stamp to get back in the club, but..."

"I unnerved you," he says, sounding almost pleased at the notion.

That *should* unnerve me, but there's something calming about the man's voice. There's a confidence, a capableness I pick up even without ever having met him. "How do *you* typically respond when people give you an answer you don't like?" I ask.

His answer is simple. "I don't accept answers I don't like."

Smiling faintly, I say, "That's a bit unrealistic, isn't it? We all have to hear answers we don't like sometimes. That's life."

"For some people, maybe."

"For everyone. Nobody can win all the time."

When he speaks again, there's something almost fond in his tone. "I very much look forward to meeting you, Miss Meadows."

I glance down at the dirty sidewalk beneath my nude heels. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Yes," he says, as if waiting for me to explain why it's relevant.

I smile faintly. "That hardly seems fair."

"Do you expect life to be fair?"

I shrug. "I don't expect it, but it would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Not for me," he says wryly.

Ignoring the implication that he might live on the wrong side of Karma, I say, "You're really not going to tell me your name?"

"I'll tell you my name when we meet in person. My driver's nearby, he should be there in a few minutes."

“Where is he taking me?”

“He’s bringing you to me.”

His words shouldn’t send a shiver down my spine. Or maybe they should, I don’t know. I’ve never had a man say something like that to me before.

“And where are you?” I ask.

“Purgatory,” he answers.

I frown, unsure whether he’s being cute or naming a real place I’m just unaware of. “Paying for your sins?”

“No, I haven’t sinned yet. Not tonight, anyway.”

“If you’re already in purgatory, you better not,” I advise. “You’ll never make it to heaven that way.”

“Oh, I’m never going to Heaven, regardless of how long I spend in Purgatory. I’m in Hell, that’s where you’ll be meeting me. You won’t be able to enter without an invitation, so I’ll send one of my men outside to escort you in. What are you wearing?”

I glance down at the outfit I put together before heading out tonight. “Um... a white silk blouse and a metallic pink skirt. What exactly is Purgatory?”

“A club,” he answers.

“And you have... men?”

The line falls quiet. For a moment, I wait, hoping he’ll speak again—and not even really sure why I hope that. I guess I like talking to him, even if he is a mysterious stranger.

“We’ll get better acquainted once you’re in my territory, Miss Meadows. In the meantime, you should probably text your friend to let her know you won’t be coming back inside. Don’t tell her where you’re going.”

That's a sketchy request, but it doesn't feel like a request at all—it's an order.

If Jackson ordered me around, I wouldn't have liked it, wouldn't have tolerated it for very long, but recalling what this man said about not accepting answers he doesn't like, I remind myself that whoever he is, he's used to getting his way.

I don't know who he is, or what kind of trouble Jackson could be in that this man is involved with, but it seems to me I have little to gain by arguing with him over this.

I can tell Charity where I'm going. It's not like he would know I disobeyed him.

"How do I know I'll be safe?"

"You don't," he answers simply.

I wait for him to assure me I will, but he doesn't.

It feels discomfiting, but I'm not sure why. If he *did* mean me harm, it's not like he would tell me. It would have cost him nothing to reassure me, though, and he made the deliberate choice not to. That says something about him—something I'm not sure I like.

Before I can decide whether or not to heed the warning in his words and his carefully chosen silence, a sleek black limousine pulls up to the curb and diverts my attention.

I watch as the driver gets out and looks over at me. He's not a slim older man with a mustache and a cheap suit like I might imagine the driver of a car service to be. He's younger and muscular, clean shaven, and his head is shaved, too. "Hallie Meadows?"

A strong sense of foreboding washes over me at the sight of this driver who looks more like a fighter, but I ignore it and nod.

He nods once, then walks around to open the back door. His gaze returns to me in a way that makes me feel like it's his job to keep an eye on

me. Like if I ran right now, he would give chase.

He gestures for me to get inside.

I'm not sure I should.

"I believe my ride is here," I tell the man on the phone, hoping for some kind of reassurance that I'm not making a massive mistake.

"Then I'll see you soon," he says.

He hangs up before I can ask any other questions.

The driver is still waiting with the door open.

Now that I'm not on the phone with that oddly compelling man, I feel even less sure about getting into the car he sent for me. It doesn't seem like a good idea.

I look back at the club. The bouncer is watching, a bit more curious now that a limo is waiting for me.

I hate to leave Charity, but I can always text her once I deal with whatever Jackson's problem is. I could meet back up with them at whatever bar they head to next—or maybe even invite them to this Purgatory place. The man said it was a club. An exclusive one, sure, but apparently "his man" can get me in.

He could probably get Charity and the other girls in, too. Charity would definitely get a kick out of getting into such an exclusive place. It would probably be the highlight of her whole bachelorette party.

The more I think about it, the more it seems like I *should* get into the car he sent for me, so without further hesitation, I do.

Chapter Two

Calvin

When I invited Jackson Price—an employee of mine who isn't *bad* at his job, but certainly has room for improvement—to come out with us tonight, my CIO thought it was merely because I was taking a measure of the man. Using an unorthodox method of taking a peek inside and seeing what he's made of so I will have a better idea of how to make the best use of him professionally.

He's not completely wrong about my wanting to assess the man, but it had more to do with his recent breakup than any professional intentions.

I guess the breakup isn't really recent anymore, but I only found out about it recently.

It wouldn't matter to me at all, but at the office Christmas party last year, Jackson's girlfriend caught my eye. I never got a chance to talk to her. I knew I couldn't just steal her from an employee because I liked the look of her, and I was there with somebody else, anyway.

When I overheard him griping about her to someone at the office the other day, I knew there was an opening. A small one. They were broken up, but still in contact—though judging by the way he spoke about her, she should *not* be answering his calls.

It says something about her that she is, though. Something I like, because maybe it indicates she'll suit me better than she suited him.

I know men like Jackson Price, and I may not be a perfect man myself, but I've made it a point not to be like him.

Jackson is spoiled rotten, obtuse about the good things he has right in front of him. He believes he's owed everything and she's owed nothing. He

thinks Hallie was out of line for finally getting sick of his shit and leaving him, but he most assuredly does not think *he* was out of line for heaping his attention upon the many other women he seemed to find much more fascinating than his own.

I think he was sitting on a diamond mine and lusting after costume jewelry.

Tonight, watching him do coke off a pain slut's tits, I was utterly disgusted by him. Even halfway to fucking someone new, he couldn't stop bitching about Hallie—and it's unclear what she ever did to him that was so egregious, other than come to the conclusion that his spoiled, shallow ass wasn't doing it for her.

I'm a lot of things, but shallow and faithless are *not* among my more problematic traits.

Spoiled is up for debate. I live a life of excess, but I've worked hard for every bit of it. I even shunned my birthright and built something entirely of my own instead.

Whether or not you want to call me spoiled, I *am* a man accustomed to getting what I want, and there are certain aspects of my personality that aren't for everyone.

My sex life, for example.

What turns me on horrifies some, even though I work to keep it in check. Above all else, I'm a reasonable man. I understand that my predatory side is unconventional, that seeing fear leap to a woman's eyes and knowing I put it there shouldn't get me hard as fucking steel.

It does, though.

I've never been able to find anything else that could come close to heating my blood the same way.

For the past several years I've been able to satisfy my darker cravings by coming to this club, playing with like-minded individuals.

Lately, even that has lost its luster.

When I play here, it's always with a consenting playmate. We're each performing our agreed-upon role, but lately the experience has started to feel mundane. I've started to wonder if maybe playacting has lost its edge and I need to take it to the next level.

When I play with a woman here, her fear isn't *real*. Maybe that's why it isn't working for me anymore. Perhaps I need the potency of the real thing.

I don't know if the floor has fallen, the depths of my depravity sinking to new lows, or it's something else. I only know last time I roleplayed with one of the ladies here, I felt... bored.

It has been a while since I visited, the grime of the last visit lingering and draining my interest. The only reason I came out tonight was because of Hallie. She was the last person to spark my interest, and she wasn't even naked or afraid. She was wearing a lovely red dress and smiling sweetly at someone else as she sipped her punch across the room.

Even without speaking to her, she lingered in my mind long enough to become a preoccupation.

Tonight, I want to taste her fear.

I want to play with her.

I'm *going* to play with her, whether she wants to play with me or not.

Anticipation courses through my veins as the ominous black door eases open. Hollis, my driver/bodyguard, escorts a wide-eyed Miss Meadows in behind him.

A rush of blood hits my cock at the mere sight of her, doe-eyed and mildly horrified by the depravity of her surroundings.

"What is this place?" she asks Hollis, her voice small, like maybe the rest of us won't hear her if she's quiet enough.

That and the way she leans close to him as if he might protect her makes me think he did his job well, made her feel safe with him when he brought her into the club and down to Hell—a place where *no one* is guaranteed safety.

Hollis doesn't answer her. Instead, he opens his briefcase and draws out an NDA and a pen. "I need you to sign this before we go any further."

Hallie frowns at the paper as he hands it to her. Her frown deepens as she scans the document, then she looks back up at him. "Why?"

"Standard procedure."

She only hesitates for a moment, then she hands the form back without touching the pen. "No."

I like the sound of that word on her lips.

"What is this place?" Her gaze drifts around the room, briefly registering the other men before landing on me. It's unlikely she recognizes me since we didn't speak at the office party, but there's a flicker in her gaze, almost like she does.

Hollis looks to me for direction, wanting to know if he should push the issue with the non-disclosure agreement or let it go for the moment. I shake my head faintly so he backs off.

Hallie steps forward, looking around the dark interior of the room we're in.

The Hell level of the night club has different rooms for different play, but the one I chose has a dark, grungy aesthetic reminiscent of a castle dungeon. There are even shackles on the wall behind me with an assortment of toys hung up beside them—perfect for chaining up your unwilling partner and forcing any sensation you want on their vulnerable body.

I picture Hallie there, pulling on her chained wrists, bent over with her legs forced apart, her lovely pussy on display for me to touch, taste, or fuck any way I please.

There's a cage on the floor, too—not the kind women dance in on the upper levels, but the kind you'd keep someone in if you wanted to treat them like an animal.

It's not all cages and shackles, though. There's a long black leather couch along the wall where I'm sitting now. In the corner there's a wooden chair placed at an angle—a contraption that looks more like a medieval torture device than anything sexual, with leather straps for binding someone, making them entirely helpless as you inflict any pleasures or horrors upon them you choose to.

Jackson is sitting on a red upholstered bench on the wall opposite me, his wild-eyed gaze focused on Hallie.

I wonder if he's having second thoughts.

Looks like he is.

He certainly should be.

Bastard.

Even though I'm the one who will benefit, I'm disgusted by how easily I convinced him to betray her.

Hallie is still mostly watching me, but her gaze drifts back to Jackson, warier than it was before. Sensing danger in this place, she tries to make her tone harder as she addresses him. "I can't stay long. I have to get back to Charity's bachelorette party. What do you need from me?"

Unsure how to answer, Jackson's gaze flickers to me.

He doesn't need anything from her, of course. It was a ruse to get her here, something he was sure would work. He was quite cocky when he expressed to me that he was sure she'd show up for him, no problem. His first attempt to get her here failed, but thankfully she answered his text a little later and got on board.

I stand. The movement catches her attention. She shifts, then covertly takes a step back toward Hollis as if he'll protect her.

Not from me, he won't.

"I'm the one who needs something from you," I state.

Recognition lightens her expression, diminishing some of her fear.
"You're the man I was talking to on the phone."

"Yes."

I walk closer to her. For a moment, she doesn't back away. It makes me think I must have made a halfway decent impression on the phone. Perhaps she's lulled by the sense of familiarity into thinking I won't pounce on her, that I'm not dangerous.

When I get about two feet away from her, she finally takes a step back. Some of the wariness returns, but not as much as before.

"You were supposed to introduce yourself when I got here," she reminds me.

"I'm Calvin."

"Hallie," she says automatically, even though she knows I already know her name. Licking her lips and trying to maintain some distance between us, she asks, "And what, exactly, did you need from me, Calvin?"

"We're going to play tonight, Hallie."

She swallows, regarding me carefully as I move even closer. She tries to back up, but she's already against a wall. With Hollis guarding the door and me in front of her, she doesn't really have anywhere to go. "Play?"

"Mm-hmm. I like to come here and enjoy a certain kind of play you can't enjoy in other places. The NDA is a mere formality. You should know that now, lest you decide tomorrow you need to tell someone what happened here tonight. Nobody will believe you. Your presence at this club—on this level—all but implies consent."

"I—I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know what this place was. I still don't," she adds, looking around at the other people in the room for help, someone to take her side.

“You can all go,” I tell them without looking away from Hallie. “I don’t like an audience.”

Her gaze lingers on Jackson the longest. She hasn’t yet accepted that he lured her here to be my next meal, so she manages to look stunned when he slinks out with everyone else, leaving her here at my mercy.

I observe her face as she watches everyone abandon her, all of them knowing she was lured here under false pretenses, that she didn’t mean to open herself up to this.

“Bastards, aren’t they?” I murmur, my lips tugging up in faint amusement.

She takes a deep, fortifying breath and looks up to meet my gaze. I expect to see fear etched across her lovely features, but she has a look of quiet determination instead. “Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“Calvin Cutler—we already covered the rest, remember?”

“Look, Calvin... you seem like a reasonable man.”

“I am.”

She nods, her eyes brightening a bit with useless optimism. “Good. Being a reasonable man, you understand that I had no idea I was coming to...” She pauses to look around, as if unsure how to even categorize this place. “I don’t know, a secret sex club?” Directing her gaze back at me, she continues, “And you should certainly understand that I am *not* going to have sex with you. We’re complete strangers. I don’t have sex with strangers, no matter how attractive.”

I cock my head, surprised at the offhanded compliment.

I’m a little less surprised when she goes on, slyly trying to get her hand on the wheel and turn this car around.

“Now, you’re obviously a man who wouldn’t have any trouble at all finding a willing female to come with you to a place like this, but it’s not me. I’m not willing. And my friend, Charity? She’s a lawyer. A damn good

one. Now, I'm a peaceful person. I don't enjoy conflict, especially unnecessary conflict, and *this*... this is unnecessary. We don't need to see this through to its inevitable end—you get a quick, cheap thrill; I go straight to the hospital without showering to ensure they get as much physical evidence as humanly possible; Charity has to come back from her honeymoon and start preparing an ugly court case because I'll sue you for damages on top of the criminal charges." Her gaze sweeps my suit jacket as if impressed. "That looks like a really nice suit. I bet you're pretty well-off. Do you really want to give your hard-earned money to me? Aren't there cheaper and easier ways to get laid?"

Reluctant amusement roots itself deep inside me, deeper than I've ever felt it. "Wow. You're something else, aren't you?"

She looks up at me, her expression docile despite all the threats she just threw at me. "I'm just telling you how I see it."

I nod as if convinced. "I appreciate the peek into your mind. Now, would you like to hear how *I* see it?"

Her eyes dim a bit. She swallows, but attempts to maintain a brave face. "Not really. Why don't we just go with mine? I'll leave, you can go about your business, and I'll never speak to that little rat-faced weasel again. Everybody wins."

I smile at the insult to Jackson. "Yes, that ex-boyfriend of yours is a real piece of work. I can't believe you showed up to help him, honestly. You should hear the way he talks about you."

She rolls her eyes. "His ego is bloated. He can't fathom that I didn't like him. It turned him into a crazy person—or maybe he was like that when we met and I just didn't notice. That seems more likely." Narrowing her eyes as she looks at me, she adds, "Wait, do I attract crazy people? How did I catch your attention?"

The wave of amusement rolls over me again. "Handsome, reasonable, *and* crazy?"

“You’re quite the catch.” Suddenly inspired, she lights up. “Hey, tell you what? Why don’t we leave this dungeon and go upstairs? I saw a bar on the way in. We could have a drink, get to know each other a little better. Then we won’t be strangers anymore,” she adds a bit enticingly, as if perhaps then she’ll consider sleeping with me.

I ignore the blatant bait. “So you can pretend you have to pee and slip out of the club? I don’t think so.”

Her nose wrinkles up adorably with annoyance. “Maybe that’s not my plan. Maybe I just want to hook you better with my dazzling personality. Maybe I’m a golddigger, and you’re a nice-looking prize.”

I shake my head. “If you were, I’d be bored already. I like you more than I thought I would. You come across as sweet from a distance. I didn’t expect you to be wily.”

“I am sweet, just not to men who lure me into dungeons with the intent of mistreating me.”

Her unexpected bluntness gives me pause.

For the damndest sliver of a second, I reconsider my plan. I like Hallie enough to spend more time with her. If I do what I initially intended to her tonight, I’ll burn her out in one go. She’ll want nothing to do with me afterward.

Then again, it seems unlikely she would ever agree to go out with me after I lured her here tonight with bad intentions. Even if I could somehow convince her and I ended up enjoying a night out with her, it would likely only lead to boring sex—at best.

It’s not as if I could convince her to come back through these doors with me after taking her out to dinner. I doubt I could even lure her upstairs, given she would have the advantage of knowing I almost pounced on her down here tonight. If I wanted to take her after dinner, it would have to be in the back of a limousine. Once I finished with her and she escaped with her tattered spirit and terrible memories of me, I would never see her again.

Whether I enjoy Hallie Meadows for a whole evening or this one, single fuck, I'm only going to get one go at her.

It's the nature of the beast, unfortunately.

I don't know why, when I look into her endless ocean eyes, I get the sense that one time will never be enough. That it will haunt me as much as it haunts her. When she's lying in bed alone at night replaying what I did to her, I'll be across town in my own bed, thinking the same thoughts.

Maybe I should heed the warning and turn back now, before it's too late.

I can't bring myself to do it, though. If I can have one taste that lingers for a while or no tastes at all...

I have to taste her.

So I do.

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Chapter Three

Hallie

I thought it would work.

I thought I could reason with him.

Now I can't think at all as adrenaline surges through my veins and my heart threatens to beat its way out of my chest.

Whatever I expected him to do next, I didn't expect him to kiss me.

My hands press against his firm, muscled chest, useless as I try to push him away. Even though they've proven ineffective, he captures my hands and wrestles them behind my back, gathering both of my wrists in one of his massive hands and forcing me back against the cold, hard wall.

I imagine I'll be able to tug free, but I'm wrong. Even with one hand he's able to keep my wrists trapped behind me, the only thing between my body and the cold cement blocks.

Frustrated, I turn my face away to evade his brutal kiss, but he grabs my jaw with his free hand and forces my gaze back to his. My heart lurches at the coldness in his deep brown eyes.

"I don't know if you know this, Hallie, but it's not much fun to kiss someone who won't kiss you back."

"You're a complete psycho if you think there's even a chance I'll kiss you back," I tell him.

His gaze warms with something I might call affection if I were a nutcase. I start as he loosens his grip on my jaw to caress it instead.

A shiver dances down my spine. I don't know what to make of this man. There's something obviously off about him, but...

It's the 'but' that's my damnation.

A normal woman would look into the eyes of this predator and feel no faint pull of curiosity, only the self-preserving instinct to get the hell away from him.

I do want to get away from him, but I'm curious, too. Maybe it's the curiosity that keeps me from raising my knee and bringing it full force into his junk, incapacitating him just long enough to wrench the door open and flee this awful place.

I'm not sure how far I'd get, though. Maybe that's why I don't do it.

I'd rather get out of this peacefully than make him angry. He's bigger and stronger than I am. He can hurt me if he wants to.

He has men, too. The man that brought me here, the one he sent away because he doesn't want an audience, I doubt he left. Even if I made it through those doors, the guard would probably catch me and haul me right back inside.

Then I'd be right back where I began, but with my aggressor injured and angry.

No, running won't work.

Appealing to his mercy still seems like the best option to me at the moment. There's something off about him, but he seems rational. He's not some raging, unthinking beast. He's a man, just perhaps an odd one.

As that thought flits through my head, he pushes a button on my blouse through its slit.

The thought of him undressing me spurs me to action. "Wait. Please, let's think about this."

"I appreciate your attempts to reason with me, Hallie, but you should know they won't work."

As he says it, he releases my wrists and grabs my hips, turning me around so I'm facing the dungeon wall. Before I can do anything with my

hands, he shoves me forward and uses his body to pin me against the wall.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as he reaches down and lifts my skirt, running his hands over my ass.

“Very nice,” he says, as if appraising fruit at the market.

He’s a psycho.

My gaze flickers to the door. I’m still doubtful running will work, but I don’t know how else to keep his hands off me. If it’s my only chance to escape, I have to take it.

Rearing back suddenly, I crack my skull against his as hard as I can.

Ouch.

It hurts like hell, but he wasn’t expecting it, so he stumbles back a step.

Fear courses through me. I know he’ll be meaner if he catches me now, so I can’t let him. I lunge for the door, grabbing the handle to yank it open.

Only when I pull with all my might, nothing happens. It’s like tugging on a handle attached to a solid brick wall.

Horror floods me as I pull harder. It doesn’t make sense. I know this is a door. I came in through it. Why won’t it open?

Why won’t it open?

As if he can hear my frantic thoughts, Calvin explains, “It’s locked. You can’t get out of this room until I let you out.

Until *he* lets me out?

Dread blossoms in my chest.

That can’t be true.

It can’t.

It can’t, it can’t, it can’t.

“You’ll never let me out,” I whisper.

“I will, after I’m finished with you.”

His words slide over me slowly, depositing horror and dread everywhere they touch.

He says it like I should find some solace in his promise, but his promise is horrific.

Hopelessness swallows me up when he steps into sight. It’s the way he moves. He isn’t moving quickly, anxious to catch me before I can escape. He isn’t even trying to stop me like he would if I stood a chance at escaping him. Instead, he leans a shoulder against the cool wall and watches me yank uselessly on a door that won’t budge.

Tears fill my eyes. This isn’t fair. I’m literally *trapped* inside this room with him.

Giving up on pulling the door open, I clench my fists and beat on it instead. “Help! Somebody please help me! I’m here against my will. I’m trapped in here with a man who wants to hurt me. Please, help me!”

Still unfazed, he examines his neatly trimmed nails. “No one will come.”

This really is Hell.

My chest begins to tighten, but I do my best to fight the onslaught of panic. I have to stay focused. A panic attack won’t get me anywhere.

A little voice whispers at the back of my mind, echoing a hopelessness I can’t accept yet.

Nothing will.

No. No, no, no. I won’t accept that. I can’t.

This can’t be happening.

My mind races to fit together all of the information I have, but the picture it paints is an awful one. If I can’t get out of this room until he lets me out...

I'm at his mercy in a way that's grossly unfair. All I want is to leave, but I literally *can't* until he chooses to release me. Letting me go has to be *his choice*, and he won't make it until he's been satisfied.

I can't win. I can't get out of this. I'm trapped here until... until he's finished with me.

My stomach twists up until I think I might be sick.

I don't accept answers I don't like, he said on the phone, and he really meant it.

He's not just an absolute psycho, he's cruel. So cruel he has no qualms about stripping away my ability to defend myself just so he can get off.

I tilt my chin up as he pushes off the wall and moves closer.

I'm starting to realize there's really nothing I can do to defend myself, but my defeat is so unfair, I'm struggling to come to terms with it.

Tears glisten in my eyes. I refuse to look at him, so he grabs my jaw and tilts my face until I relent and meet his dark, unfeeling eyes.

He leans in. My heart jumps when his lips brush mine again. I didn't really feel it before, I was too shocked, too convinced I could get out of this somehow.

Now, I'm trapped in cement shoes. I can feel the icky muck of inevitability beneath them, and I know there's really nowhere to run.

I have no choice but to please this monster, so I kiss him back.

It feels terrifying and horrible at first, like selling a piece of my soul to the devil and praying he doesn't demand the rest.

As the horror ebbs, though, it begins to feel less like a deal with the devil and more like a kiss from a man. He tugs my tucked-in blouse out of my skirt. His hand slides beneath the fabric and skims my side, then he grabs my waist to pull me closer as his kiss deepens.

Adrenaline and horror mingle together in my veins as he moves me away from the wall. I don't know where he's taking me, I only know he's in charge. He doesn't break the kiss as he walks me backward. He doesn't break the kiss until the backs of my legs hit smooth black leather, then he does so abruptly and gives me a shove.

I gasp as I fall back on the long black couch. Fear floods my gaze as he moves to climb on the couch with me. Out of some instinct that can't serve me here, I try to back away from him.

He smiles, amused, and grabs my ankle. My gaze darts to his long fingers closed around my foot. He tugs off my nude-colored heels and carefully puts them on the ground.

His gentleness throws me. If he doesn't care about hurting me, he certainly shouldn't care about scuffing my shoes.

I swallow, filling up with uncertainty. I don't understand this man's motives. He's confusing to me, and I don't know how to deal with it.

Once my heels have been removed, he slides his hand up the inside of my bare leg. I squeeze my knees together, but he easily pushes them apart and slides his hand up my thigh, too.

This can't be happening.

Defeat wraps its fingers around my throat, threatening to choke me out.

Maybe I should let it. If there's nothing I can do to stop this man from having his way with me, maybe I should just detach and let it happen. When he's finished with me, I can leave, just like he said.

As long as he isn't lying.

It's the oddest thing to ask, but it's the thought I grab onto, so as he climbs on top of me and starts to unbutton the rest of my shirt, I ask, "Are you a liar?"

He seems to find the question curious, too. He doesn't meet my gaze or pause in undressing me, but he does answer. "Not generally, no."

I wouldn't count tonight as a common occurrence. "But you'll lie if you have to."

His gaze meets mine. Understanding where the question is coming from, he tells me, "I'm not lying to you, Hallie."

"You'll really let me leave? Even though... even though I know who you are?"

He nods as if entirely untroubled by the prospect. "As I told you, if you try to tell on me, no one will believe you. Not fair, I realize, but that's life."

Bullshit is what it is.

"As for suing me, you can if you want to, but I'd settle out of court for a paltry sum your lawyer would get most of." He rips my blouse open and meets my gaze. "If you want to be compensated, all you have to do is ask."

My heart thunders as he starts to peel my shirt off. Aggravated by how cavalier he's being as he talks about throwing money at my pain, I shove him away and pull it closed. "You're a real asshole, you know that?"

His eyebrows rise in surprise. "I thought I was being quite accommodating."

I'm not doing this. I can't. I don't care if it means I'm trapped in this room for the rest of my short life, I refuse to be one more person who rolls over and lets this man have his way.

I try to kick him in the face, but his reflexes are quick and he blocks me, grabbing my leg before I can do any damage.

Frowning, he asks, "Did I offend you?"

He cares about offending me when he's totally fine with violating me?

He's insane. I try harder to kick him in his stupid face even though he catches my other leg, too. All it ends up doing is spreading my legs and trapping them in his strong hands so I can't move easily.

"How many women have you done this to?" I demand.

His frown eases. A glint of pleasure dances in his eyes as he tells me, “You’re my first.”

My heart sinks. He hasn’t done this before? Who just wakes up one day and decides to do something like this? “I don’t believe you,” I say, but he can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

“It’s the truth. I’ve played out rape scenarios with other women, but they were all willing.”

I’m horrified, but my curiosity is piqued. “Scenarios?”

He nods, releasing my legs and grabbing me so he can turn me around. I clutch my open blouse as it tries to fall off, and Calvin pulls me back against his chest, locking an arm around my neck and leaning in to murmur in my ear. “Last time I reserved a room with a bed. My playmate curled up to sleep alone—naked, like a good girl—and I played the big bad home invader who forced his way into her home and her body.”

His words send a sinful shiver down my spine. My breath catches imagining the scenario playing out. “But she... she liked it.”

“Oh, yes. She liked it a couple of times,” he murmurs warmly, kissing the shell of my ear. “I waited until she actually fell asleep so she’d truly be surprised. When I forced my cock inside her, she woke up and started fighting in earnest. For just a moment, her consciousness was too blurry for her to realize she was getting what she wanted, and that moment... that was the most exhilarating part.”

His words are demented, but the gooseflesh rising on my body as he tells me this wicked story and kisses me is no less depraved.

This shouldn’t excite me, not even a little bit.

I know I don’t want him. In my perfect world, he wouldn’t be kissing me, touching me, whispering wicked words in my ear.

But we’re not in my perfect world tonight. We’re in his.

A world where he can do whatever he wants to me, and the more I fight back, the longer I'll be trapped here with him.

At least I can rest easier knowing he doesn't have a trail of victims following behind me, I guess. But why the deviation tonight, with me? What will happen after tonight? Will he go back to playing with willing playmates, or will this whet his appetite for *actually* stripping away a woman's will before he can fuck her?

His warm breath on my ear startles me as he murmurs, "How's that for honesty?"

Pretty honest, I guess.

I tilt my head away from him, but I can't get far with his forearm locked around my neck. "Why me?"

He keeps his arm around my neck to keep me close, but with his other hand, he lifts my bra so my boobs spill out. Then he slides his massive palm over my bare flesh and squeezes each one. "It had to be you," he answers simply. "There's no rational reason, but I saw you at the office Christmas party with Jackson and you haven't left my mind since."

The Christmas party? That was so long ago, and I don't remember ever meeting him. He's not the sort of man you forget.

I'm so distracted trying to remember seeing him that night, I'm caught off guard when he moves and my position shifts with him. I almost ask what he's doing, but before I can, he eases me down on my tummy against the smooth leather.

My heart jumps to my throat as he unhooks his arm from around my neck and stands. MY tummy somersaults as he starts to pull my metallic pink skirt down.

"Stop," I say, twisting back against the couch cushion and attempting to shove his hand away. "Please."

It doesn't work. He firmly pushes me back down on the couch, yanks up my skirt, and smacks my ass so hard, a yelp slips out of me.

The sudden impact turns me red, and not just my ass in the spot he slapped. I can feel heat rising to my face as he gives my skirt a firm yank and drags it off me.

He spanked me like an errant child.

No nonsense, no fuss. He doesn't even seem mad now, just eager to get my panties off.

I know what happens if he gets my panties off, and even if rationally I know there's little chance of getting out of it, I *want to* so badly, I try anyway.

"Please," I say, grabbing at my panties even as he tugs them lower. "Calvin, please. I'll get you off if you want me to. I'll—I'll let you use my mouth. Please, just not this."

If he finds my offer interesting, I certainly can't tell.

He climbs on the couch behind me. I'm naked below the waist now, so he gets on his knees and positions himself between my spread thighs.

I try to close them, but he's in the way.

I hear the *thwip* of his belt as he removes it, then his zipper as he pulls it down.

He can't do this.

He can't, he can't, he can't.

But as he pushes me down so my face is pressed against the leather, my palms braced on the couch and my ass in the air, it seems inevitable that he can—and he will.

Chapter Four

Calvin

She's absolutely perfect trapped beneath me on the couch, attempting to crawl away. I run my hands across her smooth flesh, caressing her ass and squeezing as I nudge her thighs apart.

Beautiful.

I want a photograph of her perfectly rounded ass and bare pussy to put on my wall and look at every night before I go to sleep.

I need to be inside her like I need to breathe, so as she squirms and tries to get away from me, my grip on her tightens. I reach down and grab my cock, stroking it as I guide it to the paradise between her thighs.

"Please," she cries, knowing she's running out of time.

Doesn't she know she's just making it better for me?

I pretend for a second that she does, that she doesn't care if my appetites are twisted and wants it to be good for me.

The head of my bare cock hits her entrance and she cries out another useless denial.

She says my name this time, though. I like my name on her lips.

"Say it again."

"Calvin, please," she repeats.

I close my eyes briefly, absorbing the pleasure of her begging me right before I claim her.

Then I breach her entrance. She tries to move away, but I dig my fingers into her soft skin and hold her hips where I need them so I can force

my way deeper into her body.

“Please.” She sobs, at least I think she does. It’s hard to pay attention when it feels like my cock is sliding into heaven here in the pits of Hell.

“Christ.” She’s tight. Unprepared. She cries out like I’m tearing her apart as I push another fraction of an inch into her unwilling body.

This won’t work. I want to use her, not destroy her.

I pull my cock out of her and let go. She collapses against the couch, and I climb off. She doesn’t move this time. Doesn’t look at me, either. Her face is turned toward the back of the couch so she doesn’t have to.

I walk over to the end table in the corner and grab a bottle of lube. On impulse, I peruse the toys on the wall, too, then grab a vibrator to bring with me.

I want to make her come. I know it’s a bit mean and she won’t want to, but *I* want it, so it’s going to happen.

I don’t know if she hasn’t moved from the couch in my absence because she’s given up, or she thought I was done with her. She couldn’t possibly think I just wanted to penetrate her and not come, right?

I should grab a condom. It’s reckless not to, and not something I would ever even consider with any of my usual playmates, but with her it adds a twisted layer of fun. She doesn’t want me to fuck her, but I will. She certainly doesn’t want me to come inside her, but for some reason, I find the idea of such risky behavior thrilling.

The untoward thought even crosses my mind that my seed could take root. I imagine her soft belly protruding to make room for my child, how she’d have to think of me every time she looked at him.

That’s a crueler thought than I’ve ever had before, but I don’t hate it, and I’m not sure why.

There’s something about this girl that feels different deep down in my gut. The idea whispers across my mind that perhaps I should’ve heeded that

warning earlier, that if I keep going now, I may go too far.

What would that look like?

I don't think I would hurt her. Not more than this, anyway. I don't think I have it in me to kill her. I have no desire to.

If I'm not worried about killing her, then how would I go too far?

Brushing off the errant pinch of caution, I refocus on the lovely task before me. I pump out a small amount of lube and slather it over the sex toy.

She doesn't even know I have a toy, so when I push it between her lovely thighs and into her body, she stiffens. She knows it can't be my cock unless my cock's a fucking foot long. The passage is much easier as I slide the toy deeper into her pussy.

I'm jealous of the toy. I want it to be my cock, so I rub myself with my free hand as I plunge the toy into her all the way to the hilt.

She snuffles. Her hips shift as she tries to move away from the intrusion, but she's not fighting hard. I've already broken her spirit, poor little thing.

I pump the toy in and out of her pussy a few times to make sure she's well lubricated, then I withdraw it and reposition the tip so she'll feel the vibration against her clit.

Then I turn it on.

Hallie jumps and tries to crawl away. I climb back on the couch so I have better control of her, but she's trying more earnestly to get the vibrator out of her. She gets her arms over the edge of the couch and is just about to roll off onto the floor. I have to let go of the vibrator to stop her.

"Stop," she says, smacking my arms and clawing at my hands, trying to pry my fingers off her. "Why are you using that? That has nothing to do with your pleasure."

“I know, it’s for yours,” I explain calmly as she digs her nails into my hand and scratches. The bite of pain only makes me smile.

Ignoring her tantrum, I slide my hand over her lovely ass again, then retrieve the vibrator that fell out of her during the struggle.

It’s still buzzing, as eager as I am to get back into the warmth of her pussy.

Maybe I’ll really fuck with her. Build her to an orgasm but not let her come until after I’ve fucked her. Then I’ll *make* her come.

Yes, I like that. It’s a better design, more suited to haunting her after she leaves me.

I push the toy inside her again, moving it around until her thighs tremble and I know I’ve hit the right spot. She goes rigid, sucking in a few shallow breaths as the vibrator hums inside her pussy.

“Does that feel good?” I ask, running a hand up her back and pushing her hair aside to expose her neck. She doesn’t answer me, but I didn’t expect her to. A faint whimper slips out of her as she fights the physical pleasure I’m forcing on her.

“Please,” she whines, the sound muffled against the leather cushion.

The soft sound of pleasure dragged from her unwillingness is music to my ears. I press the tip deeper and she gasps as it hits her clit from a slightly different angle.

“Please take it away,” she cries more desperately.

I love the way she’s softening. I thought I had broken her spirit in a bad way, but maybe I was wrong.

“You’ll feel whatever I want you to feel, Hallie. How does it feel to know that? To be my little fuck doll, completely at my mercy?”

Her breath comes raggedly, the pressure inside her building against her own will. “Please.”

She's desperate not to come for me, but with that vibration assaulting her sensitive clit, she's struggling to hold on. I can tell by the deepening sweetness of her begging, the way she claws at the couch.

"Please don't make me come. Calvin, please."

Her voice is soft and sweet like cotton candy. I like her begging me. I like it a lot.

"You want me to stop?"

She latches on desperately. "Yes."

"If I stop, I'm going to fuck your sweet pussy. You want my cock inside you instead of the toy?"

That trips her up. She doesn't want either. "I... I don't want to come. Please."

I move the vibrator, pressing it harder against her clit.

"Calvin," she cries.

I tug the vibrator out of her pussy and she sags against the couch with relief.

"Thank you," she whispers.

Thank you.

Imagine thanking me for that.

She's lovely. Once more, I wish I could keep her, explore her a bit more and really get to know her.

I can't, but I can have her right now.

Now that her pussy is slick, it's much easier to push into her. She whimpers, reaching back to push against my hip as I slide deeper into her.

Fuck.

My heart rate kicks up almost instantly.

I grab her hand and push it away, then grab her hip. I need the leverage when I pull back and plunge into her again, harder this time.

Now that I'm inside her, I'm a man possessed. The pleasure verges on fucking incapacitating as I slam into her, the physical pleasure peppered with the sound of my flesh slapping hers and the even sweeter sounds emanating from her beautiful throat as I use her body.

"Please," she cries, but I don't even know what she's begging for anymore. She probably doesn't, either.

It doesn't matter. I love every sound she makes while I'm fucking her, whether they mean anything or not.

I slam forward into her pussy and smack her ass at the same time. She cries out more sharply, but it's better when she cries. I wish I could taste her tears on my lips while I drive into her, but I can't resist my current view. The way her perfect ass looks, the way it tapers to her tiny waist. An upside down heart, my cock like a sword plunged right down the center.

I don't want to break her heart, but you wouldn't know it from the forceful thrust of my hips as I drive into her over and over again.

It's a claiming, violent and primal. I want to mark her so no one else ever dares touch her. Destroy her if that's what it takes.

It feels like I'm pounding away at her forever, but my time inside her also feels too brief. When I can feel the tension building and I know I'm close, it almost pisses me off.

Then she grabs at the couch and lets out a series of low whines that set my blood on fire, and I can't feel anything beyond pleasure and the sensation of her pussy convulsing around my cock.

That throws me over the edge. I let out a long groan and a low "fuck," holding her hips tight and forcing myself as deep as I can inside her body. Release hits hard, my hot cum pouring into her as pleasure explodes behind my eyes.

Holy fucking fuck.

All the strength melts out of my muscles, so I let go of her hip and let her sink back into the couch cushion.

I collapse on top of her, aware of my heart thundering in my chest.

Fuck.

I breathe in the clean scent of her skin as I rest my face against her back. There's something else, too, a fruity scent that I want to devour.

Without moving too much, I kiss her fruity, clean-smelling skin.

I can feel her labored breathing underneath me, but she's fallen silent.

I almost ask if she's okay crushed beneath my weight on the couch, but I'm not ready to move off her even if she says no, so I decide not to.

On the couch.

All the fun equipment in this room, and I finished her on the fucking couch.

It certainly wasn't the plan, but I can't bring myself to regret it. I feel so good, I can't bring myself to regret anything... except the fact that I won't get to have her again.

I've never attached to a random fuck before. I'm not sure what it is about this one that makes it harder, but I'm sure it will pass once she's gone. Out of sight, out of mind. That's how it always is. There has never been an exception, no matter how beautiful or witty a woman might be.

No matter how broken, either. I prefer broken women. Even once healed, there are cracks that make them much more interesting than their undamaged counterparts. I don't know if Hallie was broken before, but I know she is now.

That reminds me, I need to call Hollis back to see her home safely.

Finally pushing myself off the couch, I tuck my cock away and dig out my cell phone. I glance at Hallie. Instead of moving off the couch or

making any attempt to get dressed, she has rolled onto her side facing away from me.

I text Hollis.

I collect Hallie's clothing off the floor.

She still hasn't moved, so I walk over and sit on the edge of the couch.

I do feel something like regret, but I don't think it's for hurting her. The regret is for me, not her. I'm disappointed that Hollis is on the way to get her and she won't even speak to me.

I run my fingers through her honey blonde curls and she stiffens. I continue to play with her hair and caress her scalp to relax her, then keep my tone calm as I tell her, "Hollis will give you a ride home. You'll be safe with him."

She curls into herself even more.

"You might want to get dressed," I advise, gently. I don't want another man to see her naked, especially in this state.

"You might want to fuck off," she replies.

I can't help perking up at the sound of her speaking to me, even if it's to say that. "If you want Hollis to see your pretty little ass when he comes in, I suppose that's your prerogative."

That does the trick. She sighs heavily, then pushes herself up on the couch. I hand her clothes to her.

"You came inside me," she realizes as she's pulling up her panties.

"Mm-hmm."

"That was dumb."

I crack a smile, but I don't disagree. I'm not too worried about her going to the police. I don't think she will, but even if she does, I know my lawyers are much better than any she could hire. "If you want to leave your bank information with me, I will wire you some funds in the morning."

“Don’t bother,” she says, standing and pulling up her metallic pink skirt.

“You don’t need money?”

“I don’t want yours.” She doesn’t look at me. She focuses on buttoning her shirt back up.

I lean back against the couch, watching her slender fingers tremble slightly as she finishes buttoning the last button.

I’ve just finished fucking her, and already I’m tempted to tug the soft material off her again so I can look at her. Taste her. Touch her. Fuck her.

“What do you do for a living?”

She casts me an odd look before turning away. “None of your business.”

“I’m just curious. I want to know more about you.”

She shakes her head like I’ve said something insane, which I guess I did.

“You should let me pay you,” I tell her.

“I’m not a hooker, and I’m not inclined to let you pay me off so you can sleep better at night.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I don’t mean to mock her, but I can’t help smiling at her innocence. “I will sleep just fine. It’s not for me, it’s for you. Saying you don’t want *my* money is illogical. My money is as good as anyone else’s.”

“Not to me,” she murmurs, bending down to pick up her pink leather handbag.

“You like pink?” It’s a stupid question. Of course she likes pink. Her bag is pink, her skirt is pink. It’s a soft, feminine color that suits her well.

She doesn’t answer me, anyway. She turns around slowly as if she’s looking for something, but unable to remember what. She’s a bit scattered. I

can see it aggravates her as her hand balls up at her side and her forehead crinkles as she looks around the room, unable to figure out what she's left behind.

I know what I'm about to say is even crazier than anything I've already said, but what the hell? "I'd like to see you again."

She scoffs and shakes her head, but doesn't bother dignifying my statement with any kind of verbal response.

The door opens and her gaze shoots to it like it's her last salvation. She runs over to grab it before it shuts, startling Hollis as he walks in.

It's not wise to do that, but luckily it turned out okay this time. He flicks a gaze at me as she starts to flee.

I sit forward and reach for the shoes she forgot to put back on. "Hallie, I believe you forgot something."

She's halfway out the door when she darts a glance back in my direction. I hold out her shoes, wordlessly inviting her to come get them, but she refuses to move away from the door and let it close again.

Taking pity on her, I get up and walk the shoes over to her. I kneel down just inside the doorway and hold out her high heel like Prince Charming presenting a glass slipper to his intended.

Her eyes narrow with dislike, but she offers her pointed foot anyway.

I slide the shoe on, careful not to hurt her heel, then we do the same thing with her other foot.

Finally, she is as intact as she can be now that she's met me. Her gaze leaves me the moment it can and shifts to Hollis. "You're taking me home?"

He nods dutifully. "Yes, I am."

She nods and brushes past him. I'm sure she feels safer out in the hallway, but she isn't.

Not wanting any of the other visitors of this part of the club to spot her, I nod for Hollis to take her to the car.

She leaves me without another word. Hollis follows and the door closes, leaving me alone in this empty dungeon.

I suppose after what I just did to her, I couldn't have expected a warm farewell.

Still, I don't enjoy how the room feels colder the moment she has left it.

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Chapter Five

Hallie

I will get out of bed.

I will get out of bed.

I will get out of bed.

Instead, I burrow deeper into my protective blanket cocoon and squeeze my eyes shut. They're puffy and tired from not getting enough sleep last night. I suppose the crying didn't help much, either.

If it were any other day, I would be kinder to myself. I would be gentle and practice self-compassion. I would remain curled up in this bed for the rest of the day if I needed to.

But it *isn't* any other day. It's Charity's wedding day, and I have to get my shit together and show up for her regardless of what happened last night.

As soon as last night begins to flit across my memory, I swat it away. There's no time for that.

Running from my own memories gives me the shove I needed to get out of bed.

My bedroom is dark, just the way I like it. On a normal day, I would open the curtains now that I'm awake and let the sun shine in. I would change into workout clothes, put my yoga mat down at the foot of my bed, and get the day started right.

Today I head straight for the shower.

My hair is still damp from the one I took last night.

When I made my empty threats in Hell, I told him I wouldn't, but I couldn't climb into my own bed and feel safe there if I still smelled him on my skin, felt the evidence of him inside me.

It was bad enough that his pushy bodyguard insisted on escorting me inside my apartment. I didn't *want* a strange man in my home, especially after being trapped in that dungeon with his boss, but Hollis said those were his orders. When I told him I didn't care about his orders and tried to shut the door in his face, he stopped the door with one hand and followed me in anyway.

I didn't have the energy to fight him any more than that.

Luckily, he didn't prove as twisted as his employer. He escorted me inside, checking each room as we walked in as if I were a princess under constant threat of danger and he the man tasked with keeping me safe. It didn't make much sense, but I was too exhausted and depleted to expend much energy on it. I didn't even wait for him to leave my apartment before shutting myself in my bathroom to undress and scrub the remnants of Calvin Cutler off my body.

I dreaded leaving the bathroom, afraid the bodyguard might still be out there. But when I scraped together enough courage to leave my safe haven, the man was gone.

My front door was locked, but not deadbolted. The lock on the doorknob has been busted since I moved in, so the place isn't actually secure until the deadbolt is engaged. The man wouldn't have been able to do that from outside without a key, so I walked over and locked it myself. I looked around the kitchen, but nothing appeared to be displaced. When I returned to my bedroom, I found a cup of steaming hot tea waiting on my bedside table.

He made me tea?

I didn't drink it, of course. It could have been drugged. I took it to the kitchen and dumped it out, but it still seemed strange that the bodyguard provided post-assault aftercare.

That conjured memories of the moments immediately afterward when Calvin sat on the couch and played with my hair. The gentle way he touched me, the reassuring tone of his voice; it was almost like he was trying to...

I shake off the thought without finishing it.

Fuck Calvin Cutler.

At least it's over now and I'll never have to see him again.

"Have you seen my brooch?"

I look up at Charity, an absolute vision in her form-fitting wedding gown with her dark hair piled in an elegant mass on the right side of her head. She looks gorgeous, but also stressed out as she looks around for her misplaced item.

Charity is so not a brooch person, so I'm a little thrown. "Your brooch?"

She nods impatiently. "For my bouquet. Tyler's grandma gave it to me so I'd have 'something old' for the wedding ceremony. Maybe I left it in the other room. Can you go grab it for me?"

"Of course."

I gather up the bottom of my blush pink gown and head toward the suite where the bridesmaids are getting ready.

"If you wrinkle that dress, I'll kill you," Charity calls out.

Sighing, I let the bottom of the dress fall, kicking at the yards of fabric as I make my way into the next room. I love a pretty dress as much as the next person, but even after altering, mine hits the floor and I keep feeling like I'm going to step on it.

“Have you seen Charity’s brooch?” I ask the first bridesmaid that looks at me.

She shakes her head no as she fixes the pearl pin in her own elegant side bun.

I don’t even know what the brooch looks like, which makes it much harder to look for it. I search every bridesmaids dressing station with no luck and finally make it back to mine.

I know *I* didn’t have the thing, but I start to search my station, anyway. As soon as I do, I notice a little black gift box with a black ribbon sitting on my counter. There’s a high-quality tag attached with my name written in fancy calligraphy.

What’s this?

I pick up the box. Frowning slightly, I glance at the bridesmaids’ vanities, but I don’t see a box that looks like this on any of their workspaces.

“Hey,” I say, to get the attention of the bridesmaid nearest me.

Deirdre looks over, cocking an eyebrow in question.

“Do you have one of these?”

She glances at the box and shakes her head. “Maybe it’s a MOH gift.”

I wasn’t expecting a maid of honor present. The pearl hair clips we’re all wearing in our matching fancy chignons were supposed to be our bridal party gift from Charity.

Curious, I lift off the top of the box. Draped across a soft bed of black is a lovely diamond and morganite necklace on a rose gold chain. I gasp softly, carefully tugging the chain free and unclasping it. I drape it around my neck and secure it, then look in the mirror as I gently finger the pendant.

It’s absolutely beautiful, and just my taste. I don’t know how she could have gotten it here so quickly if she hadn’t already been planning to give it to me, but Charity *was* complaining a little bit ago because I had forgotten

my necklace at home. She picked out a uniform look for me and all the bridesmaids—the same dresses, the same hairstyles, the same necklace. She even sent us direct links to make sure we ordered the right one. It was more than I would usually spend on a necklace and I doubted anyone would even *look* at my neck while I shared the stage with her, but I dug out my credit card anyway and bought it to make Charity happy. Unfortunately, when I was leaving my apartment today, I'd been so scatterbrained I left it behind.

This one is different, but a similar look. It looks more expensive, actually.

I know she wasn't thrilled that my neck would be naked, but I can't imagine she would be so hung up on it she would send someone to buy a more expensive necklace from a nearby store.

Clara, one of the bridesmaids, pops her head back into the room from Charity's bridal suite. "Hallie, she said she found it. It's on the bouquet already."

I thank her for letting me know and she disappears back into the room with Charity.

I look at the pretty necklace one more time, then head back into the suite to thank her, but when I get to Charity's room, she has already left.

It's nearly time to start the march down the aisle, so I head out to the hallway to retrieve my bouquet from the vase it's being kept in, then we all make our way to the lovely area outside the garden where the ceremony is set up.

Mentally, I know the ceremony is lovely, but I can't feel it. I've spent the better part of the day rushing around to help others and get myself ready, but now that the whole world has slowed down for my best friend and her almost-husband to exchange their vows...

Well, mine is catching up with me.

A wave of desolation sweeps over me as I stand there tightly gripping the lush bouquet. A weight falls upon my chest, making it harder and harder to draw a normal breath. To breathe at all without drawing attention.

I try to shove down the smothering feeling of panic, but my mind sweeps me back to that dungeon room he lured me into. I remember the feel of the cold wall pressed against my back, the shiver of fear I felt looking up into his cool brown eyes—so intense, yet so controlled. The way he looked at me, knowing what he was about to do to me. Not seeming to feel one bit ashamed of it.

Only a monster could do such a thing.

This morning I tried to tell myself it was over and I never needed to think about it—or him—ever again. But I can't shake the feeling that I haven't escaped him yet. It's like I can feel his dark eyes on me even now.

Even knowing it's all in my head, I want to run and hide.

Conscious of the wedding photographer snapping pictures, I try to keep my feelings off my face.

I didn't tell Charity what happened last night. Didn't want to tarnish her wedding day. I told myself I'd tell her later, but I'm not sure I will. I'm not sure I'll ever tell anybody.

The photographer turns and focuses on Charity with her bridal party behind her. I stand a little taller and do my best to paste a serene smile on my face.

He moves forward, focusing on me.

I keep my eyes on Charity as the camera flashes.

Once he has snapped the photo, he shifts his focus to the woman behind me.

Another flash. My vision is still a little spotty from the last one.

The photographer moves past me.

My absent-minded gaze drifts to the guests. I know it's crazy, but I still feel tense, and for my own peace of mind, I need to give my brain solid evidence that—

My heart stops.

The breath is sucked from my lungs.

The edges of my vision start to fade, and this time it's not because of a camera flash.

Sitting in a white, tulle-draped chair right on the aisle is the man who caused my sleeplessness last night. A man who has absolutely no business being here, at Charity's wedding.

Why is he here?

Panic threatens to close my throat. I don't know what to do, but it feels like something must be done.

I look around first, to see if anyone else is panicked. It's a silly instinct—he looks like a man, not a monster, so why should they feel threatened?—but to me, Godzilla just popped up and swatted over several skyscrapers, so it really feels like I shouldn't be the only one flipping the fuck out.

I am, though.

Everyone else is simply attending a wedding.

I'm suddenly sucked back into Hell.

I still can't breathe properly, but I try to as I shift my gaze back to make sure I'm not crazy and seeing things, to make sure *he's* the crazy one and he's really sitting in the audience at my best friend's wedding.

He is, and his dark gaze is glued to me.

I try to make sense of it. My brain is rioting, panicking, throwing everything out of order. Trying to restore some sense of order, I try to explain away his presence in a way that doesn't have a thing to do with me.

Maybe it's a coincidence that he's here. It's not that he's stalking me, he just happened to be invited to the same wedding I'm in. It doesn't seem *likely*, but it's not entirely implausible. I don't know all of Tyler's friends or family. Hell, he could even be someone's plus-one.

My gaze shifts to the thin blonde sitting beside him. She's wearing a purple dress that showcases her cleavage. She's pretty enough to be his date, but there's no evidence to support it. She isn't leaning close to him to murmur commentary about the wedding. He doesn't have a strong hand on her thigh, a daring hand that might drop and slide up under her dress to cause trouble while she tries to focus on the ceremony.

They don't look like a couple, but that doesn't mean they're not.

That's an even more horrifying thought.

I know nothing about the man. Just because he cornered a stranger in a dungeon and had his way with her doesn't mean he doesn't have some bullshit normal life as a façade.

He could have a wife, kids, a fucking Labrador. He could have a house in the suburbs where he exchanges mundane banter with his neighbor Bob over the idyllic barrier of his white picket fence.

Even though it's all in my head, his presence was a few minutes ago and I wasn't wrong about that. The possibility that he could have a wife or girlfriend makes me sick to my stomach.

I watch the blonde more carefully. I study her flawless tan and her glossed lips and I wonder, does she know? Does she know the man beside her is a monster who preys on other women? He might wear expensive clothes and smell really fucking good, but he's rotten underneath.

Does she know?

If he's hers, she must... right?

Purpose helps me pull it together. Suddenly, I don't know or care why he's here, but I know one thing for sure—if that woman is his date, she's going to find out the truth about him. Maybe not right now, at the start of Charity's wedding, but before she leaves with him tonight, I'll make damn sure she knows exactly *what* she's going home with.

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Chapter Six

Calvin

It was a bold move to bring a date to a thing like this.

I'm not sure what to even call the occasion—a surprise, certainly, but that word generally carries positive connotations.

Judging from the way Hallie turns white and then a particularly fuming shade of red as she processes my presence and then Kira's, it was the right one.

The opposite of love isn't hatred, after all, it's indifference. If seeing me here with someone else didn't make her angry, I would have a lot more work to do.

She's definitely not indifferent to me. When the ceremony ends and the bride and groom parade down the aisle, Hallie's gaze returns to me. She's a vision in pink, clutching her bouquet like it's a lifeline.

As she makes her way down the aisle in my direction, I spread my thighs a bit. When she walks past, the flowy fabric of her long dress brushes my leg.

It's an absurd thing to make me smile, but it does. It's exhilarating being so close to her. Close enough to touch, even if I can't right now.

I really didn't *plan* to see her again after last night. I hadn't even made it all the way home before I started to realize that wasn't going to work. All I could think about in the car on the way home was which part of the seat she had touched. That's where I wanted to sit, just to be close to her essence.

Even though I hadn't *planned* to see her again, I told Hollis to look for her invitation while he was in her apartment. I figured she would have at the

very least a wedding invitation pinned to the front of her refrigerator, maybe even a more elaborate setup since she's the maid of honor.

The moment he showed me the picture he snapped of Charity's invitation pinned beneath a painted heart magnet, I knew I would have to see her. I wasn't sure if I would crash the wedding or just hang around outside until I caught a glimpse of her, but by the time I undressed and climbed into bed, I'd made the decision to attend the wedding.

It's downright dickish to make her see me today, but my need to see her overpowered common decency. I suppose I could have stayed away, but I didn't want to.

Once Hallie isn't in the room anymore, I remember how much I hate weddings. I stand as soon as the last members of the bridal party have made their exit and leave Kira to fend for herself.

I hear her voice behind me. "Calvin, wait."

I don't.

I hear her voice again, lower and making apologies as she shoves her way through the crowd to get to me. I can tell she's irritated by the time she catches up with me. Probably wondering why I even wanted to come with her since I haven't paid much attention to her since we arrived.

It was simple. I needed an invitation, and she had one.

She also had a date—one she bailed on to bring me when I made myself available instead.

To be honest, we hardly know each other. I've bumped elbows with her a few times, noted her interest and her tight little ass, but never enough to even ask for her phone number. I found her last night, scrolling social media on my phone. I knew I needed to be at this wedding and I hadn't determined how to make it happen yet, but Charity's wedding has a hashtag, and Kira posted using that hashtag a couple of days ago when she had brunch with the bride. As soon as I saw the five second video clip of their clinking mimosa glasses, I knew I'd hit the jackpot.

When I slid into her DMs to get myself invited, she thought she had.

One of us was right.

Even though it means circulating on Kira's arm at cocktail hour and waiting for my next glimpse of Hallie, I'm glad I came. I can get a bit single-minded sometimes, and right now I'm living for the next chance I'll have to see my pretty little plaything.

When she finally finishes taking pictures with the bridal party and enters the reception area, I'm flooded with two distinctly different sensations.

Pleasure because she's here, and now it's only a matter of time until I can get her alone.

But also a streak of possessiveness that catches me off guard, because when she walks in, she's on the arm of someone else.

She can't possibly have a date, can she? Do maids of honor bring dates? Maybe they do, I have no idea, but she clearly wasn't seeing anyone last night. Did she scrounge up a date? Is she only hanging around that man because I'm here, and she believes she has protection from me if she stays by his side?

That thought is fucking laughable. If she thinks there's a single soul in this room who can keep me from her when I want to get to her, she's in for a rude awakening.

I'm such an asshole I decide to find out, even if it makes her uncomfortable. I grab Kim or Kira or whatever the fuck her name is and haul her with me toward Hallie and the man she's standing next to as she subtly scans the room for me.

My date hurries to catch up and happily settles in next to me as I drape an arm around her waist.

"Do you know them?" I ask.

“Hallie and Steve? Yeah, of course. She’s Charity’s best friend. He’s a friend of the groom’s.”

“Are they a couple?”

That’s an odd question, so she hesitates. “Um, no, I don’t think so.”

The oddest sensation occurs in my stomach. If I didn’t know better, I might think I’m... nervous.

Impossible.

Shoving away the idiotic thought and stomping on anything resembling a butterfly, I move closer to Hallie, but I can’t deny that with every step I take, I feel fuller somehow. Brimming with something I can’t put a name to or understand. I’m not even sure it makes sense, but I’m so damn happy to see her.

When her gaze lands on me, I see that feeling is absolutely not reciprocated. Her porcelain skin pales instantly. Her lips part. Her big, expressive eyes glint with something that resembles fear, but I don’t enjoy the taste of it as much as I normally do. As I approach, her chest rises and falls laboriously, as if the sight of me has made it harder to breathe.

My gaze flickers to the necklace I bought her, dangling from her lovely neck. I’m certain she doesn’t know it’s from me or she wouldn’t have put it on, but it looks perfect on her, just as I imagined it would.

She takes a step back, everything within her screaming to flee, but she doesn’t. She catches herself and stops. Looks around, anxious about how it might look, perhaps even trying to locate the bride to see if she would witness her reaction.

Her gaze lands back on the man beside her—Steve, apparently. This time when she looks at him, I don’t see relief. This isn’t a man she trusts and feels she can be herself around, it’s someone she decides to put a brave face on for, when I could have sworn a moment earlier she was clinging to him for protection.

Interesting.

Kira did say Steve is a friend of the groom's. Hallie clearly hasn't told Charity what happened—there would have been indications, some sort of protectiveness from the bride, plus then Hallie would know she could run straight to Charity right now and have me thrown out, but she doesn't do that. She squares her shoulders, lifts her chin, and does her best to achieve a brave face as she prepares to face me.

I could tell last night Hallie Meadows was too considerate for her own good, but I'm curious to see how far she'll take it.

"Hallie," I say warmly, establishing myself as a friend or acquaintance before she can speak. I grab her hand, an intimate smile on my face, and draw it toward my face. Her first instinct is to jerk away from my touch. She almost does it on impulse, but I tighten my grip before she can, keeping her from escaping.

Panic registers on her pretty face, but it's immediately doused by the logic that catches up to her, reminding her that if she pulls away from me like I'm a serpent, Kira and Steve will be confused and want to know the reason.

My pleasure grows as I watch her surrender unfold. Her whole body tenses when she realizes what I already knew when I grabbed her—she has to let me finish.

She swallows, her body ramrod straight as I draw her lovely fingers close and bow my head over them. I inhale the floral scent of her skin and close my eyes as I press my lips against her left ring finger instead of her knuckles.

The place where a ring would be if she had a husband.

Feels right to kiss her there.

The roots of possessiveness grow a little longer as I hold her hand in mine. It's too fleeting, though. Just as she knew she'd have to let me kiss her hand to keep up appearances, I know I'll have to let go of her for the same reason.

Not that keeping up appearances is remotely important to me, but it clearly is to her. She's enduring this for the sake of it, so I suppose I can't let all her effort be in vain.

"You look lovely today," I tell her as I drop her hand.

She snatches her hand back and absently rubs the skin I kissed. Despite her best intentions to play it cool, I can see she's struggling.

She doesn't thank me. That's a lapse. If she wanted to be herself, she would thank me for the compliment.

It's a small one, though. Easy enough to recover from.

I expect her to recover. I really do.

But she doesn't.

Maybe she can't.

The panic wins out over her best intentions and she flees without a single explanation.

Chapter Seven

Hallie

I can't believe he's here.

I can't believe he kissed me.

I stand inside the ladies' room with my back pressed against the door, needing a moment alone to collect myself.

As soon as my heart stops racing, I'm able to think clearly again.

I shouldn't have come to the ladies room. It's down a dark corridor away from the crowd. If he watched me disappear down that hall, he could have easily followed me. He could get me alone here, and after last night...

I can't believe he's here.

I try to breathe normally, but it still feels like a lead weight is pressing down on my chest. Now fear takes hold, because while normally it would seem irrational to worry some man I barely know might have followed me down a hall to corner me, after last night, it seems almost inevitable that he's waiting for me outside.

This bathroom isn't a single stall, it's a room meant for many ladies, but a quick walk past the stalls tells me no one else is inside. There's a lock on the door, though. If Calvin is in the hall, he could easily push me in here and lock it so no one would be able to get in. I'd be locked inside with him just like I was last night.

Impulsively, I turn the lock.

My stomach drops the moment I do.

He probably isn't out there yet.

I need to text someone, a wedding guest or bridesmaid who can come escort me out of here, but one who won't tell Charity or ask a lot of questions I can't answer.

The only person I can think of is my sister, Georgia. She knows all about 'don't ask' situations.

With shaky fingers, I grab my phone out of my small purse and shoot her a text asking her to meet me outside the bathroom. I would never ask her to come if I thought I'd be putting her in danger, but there's safety in numbers. Even if Calvin is waiting outside in the hall, he won't be alone with her for more than a few seconds. The moment I know she's out there, I'll open the door and we can leave together.

Someone tries to push the door open and my heart jumps.

I hear a confused murmur, and a moment later my phone lights up.

"It's locked?" reads the text on my phone.

I breathe a sigh of relief and unlock the door.

I pull it open and see my very confused sister standing on the other side, glancing in and seeing it's a multi-stall bathroom, so why was it locked?

"Thank you," I say, without explaining. I step outside and look both ways down the hall. I know I look like a paranoid lunatic, but I don't care. When I see the coast is clear, my chest opens up and I can finally breathe again.

He's not here.

Thank God.

Georgia is still standing there in her stunning green dress with her auburn hair piled up in a casually elegant up-do. "What's going on?" she asks.

I shake my head, pushing past the door and then letting it close behind me. "It's a long story."

Georgia nods. She knows all about long stories. Absently reaching into her purse for her lip gloss, she asks, “One you want to tell?”

“Nope.”

She accepts my answer without prodding like I knew she would, and I’m so glad. Georgia is my sister and of course she cares about me, but her own life experiences have made her less pushy about butting into my business. Charity would be like a dog with a bone, ruthlessly terrorizing the truth out of me. Georgia won’t make me spill if I don’t want to.

I’m grateful as we begin chatting casually about the wedding. “Did you enjoy the ceremony?” I ask.

“Oh, yes, it was beautiful. You seemed a little... uncomfortable?”

My gaze shoots to her, eyes wide. “You could tell?”

She nods sympathetically.

My shoulders sag with disappointment.

She’s quick to add, “Maybe I could only tell because we’re sisters, you know? Maybe nobody else noticed.”

We’re sisters, but only half-sisters. Georgia and I didn’t grow up living together, so we don’t have that close-knit bond some siblings have. She’s only being nice telling me that. If she noticed, there’s a good chance it was plain for anyone to see.

“Great,” I murmur.

I’m not doing a good enough job at this. I’ve gotta get it together. The last thing I want to do is tarnish Charity’s wedding day. Even if eventually I do end up telling her, I *have* to keep it together right now.

We make our way back to the ballroom without really talking about anything. She comments on how pretty the centerpieces are, I tell her I helped out designing the place cards, and it’s almost like this is an ordinary wedding reception where my world hasn’t been turned upside down.

I walk Georgia back to her seat and thank her. She knows I'm thanking her for more than I let on, so she offers a supportive smile and gives me a hug before I make my way back to the table where I'll be sitting beside Charity.

I lose sight of Calvin for a while, but I can feel him watching me, so it's impossible to relax.

I finally find the bastard when dinner is being served. There are a lot of people at Charity's wedding so it took some time, but now that I've found him, I don't want to let him out of my sight.

My appetite is suffering in the presence of Calvin Cutler, so Charity and her new hubby finish eating before I do. As soon as they hit the dance floor, the rest of the bridal party goes to join them.

I go to take a sip of my water and realize the glass is empty, so I put it back down. Before I can decide whether it's worth going to grab another one and risk encountering Calvin, Steve pauses by my chair and startles me with a hand on my shoulder.

"You want to dance?" he asks.

I shrug off his touch without thinking how it might look and offer up a fake-as-hell smile as I spear a piece of salad on my fork and hold it up as my excuse. "Still eating. Sorry."

"Right." He shoots me a funny look, but walks away to find someone else to dance with.

I feel a little better once I'm sitting here alone. The bridal party sits at a long table in front of all the other tables set up around the room, so my back is to a wall and I can keep an eye on—

Where did he go?

Calvin was in his seat beside the girl in the purple dress just a moment ago, but now the chair is empty.

I tense immediately, knowing he's out there but unsure where. I try to find him, searching the dance floor and the edges of the room, but I don't see him anywhere.

I try to finish eating, but I'm hopelessly distracted. He should show up at his table again, but a few minutes pass, and he still hasn't returned.

I can't leave the safety of my seat unless I know where he is. My back is to a wall and I'm in front of everyone up here, but the moment I head out on the dance floor to dance with Charity or grab myself something to drink, I'll have no idea where the bastard is. He could easily sneak up on me.

Dammit.

I wish there was some way I could get Charity to kick him out without telling her why. There isn't, but that would make my life much easier.

As I'm pondering ways to get Calvin ousted and picking at my salad, I register movement from my peripherals. My stomach plummets as I look to see who is moving toward me and I see *him* in his expensive suit with navy pinstripes, tailored to perfectly fit his toned, muscular body.

Fuck.

I guess I found him.

Chapter Eight

Hallie

Anyone watching would think Calvin looks damn good as he approaches, might even feel jealous of the attention he's giving me as he pulls up a chair and takes a seat beside me.

Obviously, that is not how I feel.

My lungs feel paralyzed having him so close. Tension gathers in my shoulders and I try to formulate words, but I'm too stunned by his audacity.

He made it clear he wasn't afraid of me last night when I threatened to tell on him. Since it's clear I didn't, perhaps he feels emboldened to approach me in front of everyone like this here, but I can't fathom that. I can't imagine being so indifferent to the comfort of someone I hurt so maliciously. I just can't wrap my head around it.

"Wow," I say, since I can't think to say a single thing else.

He cocks an eyebrow and reaches over to set a drink down in front of me.

I hadn't noticed he was carrying two.

I can't believe he thinks I'll drink something he brought me.

I can't believe him, period.

"You seemed thirsty," he remarks.

"I would happily die of dehydration before drinking anything you handed me."

Apparently unconcerned, he leans back in his stolen chair, spreads his thighs to indicate he plans to stay for a while, and takes a leisurely drink

from his glass. “We can trade if you’re worried I drugged it. I didn’t,” he adds.

“Oh, well, as long as you say so, then obviously I believe you.”

“Drugging you wouldn’t do anything for me. It’s the struggle I enjoy. You can’t very well struggle if you’re passed out, now, can you?”

His words ignite fury deep in my core, heating my blood and bringing a rush of color to my cheeks. “Have you any decency at all?” I demand, glancing around to make sure no one heard him.

“None,” he says flatly, then smiles.

“Self-preservation, then,” I snap, my gaze sliding back to his. “You got what you wanted, now leave me alone.”

“Mm.” His gaze rakes over me, an almost possessive glint in the stormy depths of his eyes. “See, that’s the problem. It should’ve been that simple. I don’t know why it wasn’t. All I do know is you’re all I could think about long after you left last night, and I wanted to see you again.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. If he were anyone else, I would do the polite thing and say thank you. It sounds enough like a compliment, if a truly twisted one.

After I violated you last night, I really wanted to do it again, so here I am.

What a prince.

I try to swallow past a lump in my throat, but my mouth is too dry. I nearly reach for the drink, but then I remember it was hand-delivered by Satan himself and stop short. “Should I be flattered?” I mutter, giving up on eating and crossing my arms instead.

Calvin leans forward, grabs my glass, and takes a drink to show me he didn’t tamper with it. “Feel however you want to feel,” he says, so close I can feel his breath on my bare shoulder blade. “You’re entitled to that.”

“I’m still not going to drink it,” I tell him.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t trust you,” I state.

He shakes his head, but doesn’t look too put out. “You’ve got it all wrong, sweetheart. It’s the slimy men who pretend to be nice guys you have to worry about slipping something in your drink. I’m not a nice guy, but I’ve been honest with you right from the start. I also have considerably more resources than a fucking frat boy. If I wanted you passed out in my bed, I’d hire men to stick you with a syringe and carefully transport you there while you were knocked out. I’d have a nice bath drawn for you when you wake up, a short, sexy little scrap of fabric to cover that beautiful body in, and once you were fully awake and able to participate, *that’s* when I would fuck you.”

I don’t know how he can say such psychotic things so comfortably. Heat creeps up my neck and I look around, still self-conscious about anyone overhearing. *He’s* the one who should be ashamed, but if anyone heard what he just said, I would be horrified.

Luckily, we’re far enough away that no one can hear us. With the rest of the bridal party out on the dance floor, we have a lot of privacy up here.

Well, I guess that isn’t really *lucky*, but depraved as he may be, it’s not like he’ll maul me with an audience.

I don’t think.

Looking directly at him feels too daunting, but I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. “Do you know men you could hire to syringe me and transport me to your home?”

“I do. And I have a flair for the dramatic, so I assure you if that’s what I wanted, I would do it that way, not by quietly dropping something in your drink at a wedding. Not my style.”

More than anything else he has said, that rings true. And I *am* thirsty, so I grab the glass of orange and yellow liquid and take a small sip.

My taste buds dance with delight. It's sweeter than I expected. I thought he would bring me something strong, but he went for something I would like the taste of instead.

He's an intriguing man. Terrible, awful, and no-good, but intriguing.

Once I've swallowed the yummy drink, I finally summon the courage to look him directly in the eye. "There. I had a drink. Now will you go away?"

"You didn't say thank you."

My cheeks warm even though it's ridiculous to have my manners rebuked by someone as heinous as him. "Thank you," I say as drolly as possible.

He smiles, his eyes glinting with pleasure. "You're welcome."

I squirm because I can tell he's thinking about last night, and that's so uncomfortable I want to crawl out of my skin. "Leave now, please. Before I have to make a scene."

He doesn't move a muscle. "You won't make a scene, Hallie, and we need to talk about these empty threats you keep doling out. Don't you know you only undermine your own effectiveness when you make an empty threat? Don't say it if you don't mean it."

"I'm trying to get you to leave," I cry, more frustration coming through than I intended. "Don't you understand that? I would say anything to get you away from me. I'm not measuring my words carefully and thinking through consequences, I'm throwing anything I can at you to try to make you leave. *Please* leave. I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you. I am furious and hurt by what you did last night, and I am also *agonizingly* powerless to take you down for it and *painfully* aware of that fact. It is humiliating and horrible, and I just want that feeling to go away."

If I didn't know better, I'd think I see sympathy gleaming in his dark eyes.

I know tears glint in mine.

Huffing, I grab the cloth napkin on the table and dab at the corners of my eyes so my makeup doesn't run.

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

I feel stupid for crying, especially in front of him, but my emotions surged and I couldn't help it.

"I'll leave if you want me to," he says, his tone much gentler.

I wait for relief to hit me, but it doesn't. Maybe it's because I don't trust him, so I won't believe he's really leaving until I've seen with my own eyes that he's gone.

I have to say something to acknowledge he's spoken, so I murmur a watery, "Thank you," as I put the napkin down on my lap.

"But I want to see you again. Tomorrow. We'll have dinner."

For a split second, my heart stops.

It's the shock.

I don't know if it's the suggestion, or the calm, certain way he says it, as if he knows this is going to happen and I should just climb on board and enjoy the ride.

I meet his gaze, so stunned I forget to be embarrassed. "Are you insane?"

He shrugs, seeming to have recovered from the momentary lapse of having a conscience. "Maybe, but not in a way you should be worried about. When you're as rich as I am, it's called eccentric."

"I am not having dinner with you."

"You are," he says immovably. It's not cocky in the sense that he's so arrogant he doesn't believe he can be turned down. He seems almost understanding of the fact that I haven't given in yet—but also damn sure I will, and this is just a dance we have to do first.

It's just like last night, but somehow even odder because we're not in a private dungeon in a depraved sex club; we're in a beautiful, public ballroom decked out for a wedding.

"No, I'm not," I say, my tone firmer.

"You are, one way or the other."

My spine straightens at the subtle threat in his words. "What does that mean?"

"Remember a minute ago when we were discussing the syringe and all that? I'm having dinner with you tomorrow evening whether you accept my invitation and get into the car I send for you or not. It's your call. I would prefer we do it the easy way since I was already pretty hard on you last night, but if you want to do it the hard way, we can."

"You cannot make me have dinner with you. And honestly, if you keep harassing me like this, I *will* have to go to the police. It's not an empty threat this time, last night I was just trying to stop you, but now—"

"You're still just trying to stop me. You won't. You're wasting your energy, sweetheart." He flicks a glance at my salad. "Are you a vegetarian?"

Startled, I look at my Caesar salad, then back to him. "No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"If you're determined to be difficult, I'll have to hire a private chef to make us dinner at home. Can't risk you acting out in public."

I laugh at the sheer absurdity. "Are you serious? I wouldn't agree to meet you in a *restaurant* so you think I'll come to your house?"

"It's a penthouse and you will. We've been over this already."

He's unbelievable. I don't even know what to say to him, honestly. "You're crazy."

"If you want me to leave, this is the way. If you want me to stick around, you can keep resisting. Both choices will have the same result: you

will come to my home tomorrow and we will have dinner together. I say this with 100 percent certainty, and I can assure you, I'm right."

He's wrong, and so frustrating that I just want him to leave. Displeasure niggles at me for the lie I'm about to tell, but I know it's ridiculous to feel bad for lying to this man after what he has done. "Fine," I say shortly. I won't actually do it, but for him to believe he's won, I'll need to seem angry about it. "What time?"

His lips curve up, pleasure transforming his harsh determination. "Seven o'clock. I'll send a car for you."

"I would prefer somewhere public. I would feel safer."

His smile shifts, taking on a sinister tilt. "You are as safe as I want you to be, Hallie. Always, regardless of our venue."

My stomach flutters at the dark promise in his words. It flutters as if I'm really going to meet him when I know I'm not.

If I were really going to meet him, I would have a lot more questions.

I'm a little worried about his threat, though. What will he do when I stand him up?

I try to imagine it. Summon a vision of him sitting alone at a table in an expensive Manhattan restaurant a half hour past the time I was supposed to arrive. I picture his commanding presence, his simmering disappointment as he swirls the alcohol in his glass before taking a swig, then sits it down with a decisive thud.

No, wait, that's not right.

It would be anger, not disappointment.

Disappointment comes from a genuine place; *anger* would be the feeling if he was only responding to my defiance.

Following some instinct I don't quite understand, I look over at him. "How will you feel if I don't show up?"

“I’m not worried about that.”

“Yes, I know you’re arrogant,” I murmur, wanting to get past that to the real answer.

Some men look at women as disposable, interchangeable. Objects to be used up and tossed out, then easily replaced with another. After what he did last night, it would be easy enough to imagine he’s exactly that sort of man.

But there are brush strokes that don’t quite seem to fit that picture, too.

If he’s a mean, angry man who means to bully me and bend me until I break, then he’s the kind of asshole there are tons of in the world, decidedly unspecial. And even though I know it will mean *I* have to go through hell over something that was done *to* me, maybe I *should* shoulder that burden and go to the police. Even if his expensive lawyers let him skate and he never has to pay for what he’s done, I would have a record of harassment started. I could file a restraining order. He could be literally dangerous, after all. Angry men kill women all the time.

Maybe it’s crazy to imagine he might be any other kind of asshole, but there’s an odd gentleness in the way he’s handling me despite the brutal force he’s trying to exert.

I don’t know.

Something feels off, just not quite what I expect.

Seeking to understand where that’s coming from, I hold his gaze and press deeper. “But how will you *feel* if I don’t show up?”

He cocks his head and watches me, almost like he’s trying to figure me out while I’m doing the same to him. “Hypothetically?”

I roll my eyes and humor him. “Sure.”

His gaze drifts for a few seconds as he thinks, then meets mine again. “Bereft.”

I take a deep breath, unprepared for that answer.

Bereft.

That's much closer to disappointment than anger.

It certainly doesn't imply he views me as disposable or easily replaced.

Sure, he could be lying, but he seems pretty adamant about his honesty, and I can't deny he has been honest about things most people never would.

For a split second, I feel conflicted.

My first instinct today was to get him away from me, of course. But right now, in this moment, talking to him and actually trying to get at the core of who he is...

I don't hate it.

My lack of relief a moment ago flits across my mind. Is it possible I didn't feel relieved when he told me he would leave because... some part of me doesn't actually want him to?

No.

That's sick.

It can't be that.

Right?

I shake my head to clear it of the insane impulse to actually go to that restaurant. To truly meet him somewhere public and safe so I can see more about who he is.

It doesn't matter who he is, not after what he did to me.

Right?

Discomfort wraps around me with the snugness of a glove and I want to peel it off, so I need him to leave.

Avoiding his gaze, I grab the drink he brought me and take a sip. "I'll meet you at the restaurant. Don't send a car for me. I'll feel more comfortable if I bring myself."

He regards me carefully for the longest moment of my life. My heartbeat skitters and pounds beneath his scrutiny. Finally, he reaches into his breast pocket and draws out a rectangular card.

I watch as he slides the matte black business card across the table. “Meet me here at seven o’clock sharp.”

It feels like I’m getting away with something, but even knowing he doesn’t deserve my time or my honesty, I don’t feel better about it. I take the card and slide it into my clutch. “All right.”

I wait for him to get up and go now that I’ve agreed to meet him, but he lingers. I swallow and take another nervous sip of my drink.

“I’m trusting your word, Hallie. I’m hesitant to do that so soon, but I’ll take a chance this time. If you prove to me that was the wrong call, I won’t do it again.”

His words send a shiver down my spine. They clarify expectations, promise repercussions. My stomach flutters nervously, and for the craziest moment, I feel compelled to apologize and beg forgiveness for trying to trick him.

Frowning at the odd impulse, I shake it off.

My chest is tightening and it’s getting a little harder to breathe. I need to step outside and get some fresh air, but I don’t want to do it while he’s still here. I don’t want to risk him following me.

Desperate for him to leave, I nod quickly. “I understand.”

He nods slowly, then stands. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow. Enjoy the rest of Charity’s wedding.”

I feel like I’m on the brink of an anxiety attack so that feels impossible, but I nod hurriedly anyway, hoping he’ll get the message that I want him to get lost.

He does.

I watch with a skittering heart and constricted lungs as he walks over to the girl in purple and leans down to murmur something in his ear.

I'm horrified to realize I completely forgot about her. At the very least, I should have asked to make sure she wasn't his girlfriend. Watching now, it doesn't seem like she is. There's still no noticeable affection between them. He doesn't give her a kiss goodbye, she doesn't even give him a hug, just nods and smiles. Then, with a last lingering look at me, Calvin leaves.

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Chapter Nine

Hallie

As six bleeds into seven, and seven into eight, I sketch, sketch, sketch.

I decided that burying myself in work would be the best thing. Work pays my bills, but it also provides an escape from my troubles by allowing me to focus on lines and shading rather than... well, Calvin Cutler.

Marie—my cat—hops up on my drawing table and brushes her bushy white tail right in my face before trying to step on my paper.

I grab her and snuggle her against my chest before her claws can destroy two hours of hard work. “I don’t think so, little girl.”

I pet her head and she nuzzles me, placing her paw over my wrist as if giving it a hug.

I smile and give her a warm hug, then I push back my chair and bend down to put her on the floor. “Just give me a few more minutes, okay? I’m almost finished, then I’ll feed you dinner. Are you hungry?”

She sticks her tail in the air and prances away, not deigning to respond since I made her get off my drawing table.

I’m a little relieved checking the clock and seeing it’s after eight. I needed to keep busy during the time when I should have been heading to the steakhouse Calvin told me to meet him at, but now that it’s too late to show up even if I wanted to—and no big, scary men with syringes have shown up at my door—I can finally relax.

It’s over. It’s done. He knows now I didn’t show up, and I no longer have to wrestle with myself over the ethicality of it all. I’ve never met someone so fixated on the truth before. People tell each other polite little

lies all the time, but with Calvin's emphasis on honesty, I feel ickier about it than I normally would.

It doesn't matter now.

I go to the kitchen and dig a can of food out of the cabinet for Marie. Now that I'm not displeasing her, she comes over and rubs up against my leg.

"Which one do you want?" I ask, holding up a green can and a purple one. "Chicken or fish?" I bend down to let her investigate each can and she paws at the purple one. "Chicken it is," I tell her, standing back up to open the can.

As I'm dishing the food into her bowl, I think I hear a noise at the door.

I freeze, and so does my heart. I wait for a knock, but there isn't one.

I drop the spoon and hurry over to the door to make sure it's locked. When he said all that stuff about the men and syringes, I told myself he wouldn't *really* resort to such drastic—and illegal—measures, but who know? Maybe he would.

The lock on the door is secure, so is the deadbolt and the chain lock. I lean against the door and try to listen, but I don't hear anything on the other side.

Maybe it was my imagination.

Hell, maybe it was someone else who lives in this building just walking by.

I'm too afraid to open the door and check.

I wait for a few minutes, then peek through the peephole to make sure there's no one in the hallway.

If anyone was there, it seems they left.

I *hope* they left. I'm terrified to open the door, so I unlock the knob and the deadbolt, but leave the chain lock secured so the door can only open a

teeny bit.

I'm tentatively relieved when the door cracks open, and no one pops up and tries to shove it open the rest of the way to force their way inside my home. I peek out and don't see anybody, but I do see a box on the floor.

A delivery. Did I order anything?

I didn't, but it's not impossible Charity ordered something for me. I'm still cautious as I unlock the door. I open it, grab the present quickly, and then slam the door shut and lock all three locks with shaky fingers.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I look down at the big gray gift box with a silver bow on top.

Nordstrom is subtly embossed on the lid, which is another good indicator that it's probably a gift from Charity and not a severed head or something else horrendous from Calvin.

I haul the box to the kitchen and put it on the counter. When I draw off the lid, I see a note lying on top of the tissue paper.

Hallie,

How unfortunate you weren't able to make our date this evening.

I've taken the liberty of rescheduling for tomorrow.

My driver will pick you up at six o'clock.

You will be wearing this.

You will come to my place for dinner.

See you then.

-Calvin

Adrenaline courses through my body.

I don't know what I expected, exactly. I guess I thought I wouldn't hear from him again after I stood him up, but I didn't expect a "you've been rescheduled" notice, and certainly not a present.

I pull back the layers of tissue paper to reveal stunning white, sequined material. There are subtle geometric shapes that glisten as the light hits the sequins. I pull out the shimmering fabric and find it's an absolutely beautiful sheath dress, the classiest thing I've ever laid eyes on in my whole life.

"Oh, it's beautiful," I murmur, since only Marie can hear me.

She comes over to see what all the fuss is about—or maybe just to see what distracted me from serving her food.

My eyes rake over the gorgeous gown. My fingers skim the banded waist.

I bet this would be absolutely stunning on.

I shouldn't keep it, though, right? I'm certainly not going to meet him at his penthouse for dinner after standing him up tonight.

And for him to call it a date—utter madness.

Then again, it's not like there's a return address...

I take the beautiful dress and hang it up in my closet, then I go back to the kitchen and finally feed Marie.

I try not to think about Calvin, try not to feel bad for things I know reasonably I shouldn't feel bad for...

And hey, I almost do.

Monday morning means heading to the office for a meeting, so I grab my sketches, kiss Marie, and make sure the apartment is locked up securely before I head out.

I'm more watchful of my surroundings than I ordinarily would be in broad daylight, and I find myself watching for Calvin's limo even though it's probably absurd; it's Monday morning, I'm sure he's at work—not out stalking me.

The meeting runs a little long and I'm starving, so I stop for a slice of pizza on the way home.

I'm anxious about being alone in the hall as I get my door unlocked and haul all my crap inside, but I feel better once all the locks are engaged.

I scarf down the pizza, my head full of new ideas for the project I'll be starting after I finish my current one. I'm eager to dig into it and bring to life the author's ideas, so I put off cleaning up until later and go to my drawing table to get to work.

The day gets away from me, and before I know it, it's 4:32.

I'm thirsty, so I go out to the kitchen for a cold bottle of water.

On my way to the fridge, I notice Marie didn't eat her breakfast.

A frown flickers across my face. That *is* her least favorite flavor in the variety pack. Maybe she wasn't in the mood for it. Sometimes she won't finish the tilapia, but it doesn't look like she even touched it.

"Marie," I call out, looking around for her. "Are you being a diva today?"

She's a diva most days, but typically a diva with an appetite.

She must be asleep or hiding because she doesn't bother to come out at the sound of my voice.

That's odd.

Marie might have a snooty little attitude, but she loves me. It's not like her to completely ignore me, but as I make my way through the small apartment, she doesn't emerge from any of her usual hiding places.

"Marie," I call out, my panic beginning to grow. I displace pillows and look under my bed. I check behind the toilet in the bathroom and open all the cupboards.

I can't find her anywhere.

My skin heats as I try to remember the last time I saw her. I know I saw her this morning before I left.

Did she get out when I opened the door?

Oh my god, if she got out, I might never find her.

I'm near tears searching every nook and cranny one more time in hopes that she'll magically appear when I hear my phone vibrate on the kitchen counter.

I'm not really worried about a missed text or phone call, but I absently grab it before heading back into the bedroom to check my closet again and behind my door.

Then I freeze. There's a text from an unknown number that reads, "Have you misplaced your kitty?"

My heart seizes. Maybe it's a neighbor, but how do they have my number if I don't have theirs? My fingers shake as I type back, "Yes. Who is this?"

"I'll give her back tonight when you come over for dinner."

For a split second, I don't understand.

Then I do, and I nearly explode with rage. "You kidnapped my cat?!" I type back furiously. "What kind of fucking lunatic kidnaps a person's cat?????"

"I found your cat. You should be grateful."

Grateful? My eyes practically bulge out of my head.

Before I can even type a response, he sends another text. “Hollis will pick you up at six. Make sure you’re ready this time.”

I’m so angry I could cry, but a little relieved, too. If Calvin has Marie, at least she’s not lost. I still want to kill him, but surely he hasn’t hurt her. “Can I see a picture?” I ask just to make sure.

A moment later, a picture comes through. Marie is lying on a white blanket that looks softer and cozier than anything I own. Her gaze is calm, her body language relaxed. Her paw is resting over what appears to be a cat toy she was playing with before the picture was snapped.

She seems fine.

I close my eyes and breathe a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” I send back. Catnappers don’t deserve thanks, but the bastard could have hurt her. Instead, he bought her a toy.

“You’re welcome,” he replies. “We’ll see you tonight?”

“Yes,” I answer, trying not to feel defeated.

“Looking forward to it,” he replies.

A knot lodges in my throat as I read that one and remember what happened last time he got me alone on his turf. Last time he looked forward to seeing me.

I tell myself it won’t happen again, but I have no idea if it’s true.

I know I have to go get my cat back, and this time I can’t ask Georgia to play chaperone. I would never put her in potential harm, and my sister is lovely—how do I know he wouldn’t hurt her?

I don’t. Just like I don’t know for a fact he won’t hurt Marie.

I could call the police and tell them this crazy man stole my cat, but even if they went to his place to ask about it, he could deny it. Assure them

that's *his* cat and the white cat I lost must be running around the city somewhere.

He has assured me he's rich, so he probably lives somewhere nice. They would probably take one look around his luxurious penthouse apartment and think I'm nuts or at the very least mistaken. Surely a man like him would have no need to steal a cat. They would leave without Marie, and then I really would risk pissing him off. Maybe he would hurt her or give her away, some vengeful action to make sure I never get her back.

I love Marie. I won't risk never seeing her again.

I have to go get her myself.

Helplessness threatens to swallow me up, but I shove it down.

I'll do what I can to protect myself. I can bring pepper spray, I can keep my phone on me. If he tries to attack me, I'll call for help.

I'm not locked in a dungeon this time.

I tell myself there are ways to make sure I'm safe in the Devil's lair, but I'm not deluded enough to entirely believe it.

Chapter Ten

Hallie

“Thank you.”

My tone is frosty despite my manners as I step out onto the sidewalk of the Upper East Side neighborhood he brought me to.

Hollis nods his head and closes the car door behind me.

I’m angry at the man for being complicit in this whole scheme—*he’s probably the one who stole my cat in the first place*—but he’s also the only resource I have for information regarding the lunatic who won’t leave me alone. “This is where he lives?” I ask stiffly, looking up at the gleaming onyx tower.

“Yes, ma’am. He owns the building.”

My eyes widen and my gaze jumps to Hollis. “The whole building?”

Hollis nods again, then escorts me to the door. “Bought it when he decided to move in. He’s not much for renting. He likes things to be entirely his.”

“Sounds a bit spoiled,” I murmur.

Hollis smirks, but doesn’t disagree. “He can afford to be.”

The lobby door opens, and a bald man in a suit emerges to hold it open for me. “Welcome home,” he says, even though he must know I don’t live here.

“Thank you,” I say, more nicely since presumably *this* man wasn’t involved in the catnapping. “I’m visiting Calvin Cutler. If I don’t come back down in an hour or so, please call for help.”

“She’s kidding,” Hollis interjects quickly.

Whether I am or not, the man guarding the door accepts Hollis’ word for it and nods his head. “Of course.”

Hollis takes my arm in a firm grip and escorts me a little more aggressively across the lobby. “I wouldn’t advise doing things like that,” he tells me. “Calvin wouldn’t like it.”

“Why should I care what Calvin likes?” I return.

He shakes his head in disapproval, like I’m too simple to understand a basic truth.

I ignore him and look around the lobby. Well, I suppose it’s a lobby. It feels more like an elite gentleman’s club than an apartment building. I can’t even imagine living in a place like this. It doesn’t seem homey at all, but I suppose maybe the actual apartments have more warmth.

My nude heels click against the cool marble floor as we take a hallway toward the elevators.

There’s an older couple ahead of us. The woman is stylish, the man’s barrel chest is wrapped in an expensive-looking suit. The elevator doors open and they step inside. I start to take a step forward, but Hollis pulls me back, his firm grip never leaving my arm. “Not that one,” he says. At first, I think he just doesn’t want me in the same elevator as other people since I might ask for help, but then he adds, “The penthouse has a private elevator.”

He has to enter a passcode to gain access to the elevator we get on.

Once we’re inside with the doors closed, he finally releases my arm. Knowing it’s because I stand no chance of escape now, my tummy begins to flutter with nerves. I fidget with my handbag as we make the journey to the top of the skyscraper, trying to focus on seeing Marie and ensuring she’s safe, not whatever else might happen tonight.

There’s a soft ding to announce we’ve reached our intended floor, then the elevator doors open to a white-walled gallery, cold and blank but for the

paintings hanging up on its walls.

As we step into the room, my gaze skates across several paintings. They're all interesting, but my attention is snagged by a brightly-colored painting that seems to show a woman with big eyes hiding in her bed with a warped mirror showing her reflection behind her. The pattern on the wall in the background is familiar. I'm nearly certain it's a Picasso—a copy of one, anyway—but I haven't seen this particular painting before.

“Do you know what this one is called?” I ask Hollis.

It's not Hollis who answers, but Calvin himself, standing in the archway to my left. “*The Mirror* by Picasso. Do you like it?”

His presence makes me tense, but I keep my gaze trained on the woman in the painting. “She looks afraid.”

Dark amusement hangs from his words. “That's why *I* like it.”

It's a depraved thing to say, but since his lips are tugged up at the corners when I look at him, I tell myself he might be kidding.

Probably not, though.

He's also holding my cat. In his black suit, stroking her fluffy little head, he looks like a super villain hell-bent on taking over the world. Marie appears to be his willing accomplice. She preens as he strokes her, the little traitor.

Abandoning the painting, I approach him and hold my arms out. “May I have my cat back?”

He doesn't hand her over, and while Marie looks at me, she makes no effort to leave his arms as he continues to stroke her head.

I cock an eyebrow at him expectantly.

“I'm not forcing her to stay,” he points out. “What can I say? Your pussy likes me.”

Huffing in annoyance, I slide my hands under Marie's fluff and lift her into my arms. Once she has been extracted from his hold, she tilts her head and nuzzles my neck. "The Stockholm syndrome is wearing off already, hm?" I murmur, nuzzling her back. Her softness soothes my soul, but I'm still a bit miffed about her enjoying him petting her. "He kidnapped you, you know? You're not supposed to like him."

To prove she does, Calvin reaches over and offers his hand. She nuzzles her head right into his palm.

"I should have adopted a dog," I state wryly. "At least they're loyal."

Calvin's lips quirk in amusement.

Behind us, Hollis asks, "Will you be needing anything else from me tonight, sir?"

Calvin shakes his head without looking away from me. "You can go."

I didn't expect Hollis to stay for dinner, but the prospect of our only possible chaperone leaving makes my stomach pitch with dread. I don't want to be left alone with Calvin. "Is there a private chef here?" I ask.

Calvin nods and turns, obviously expecting me to follow him. "He's making us dinner now. We'll have salad and three courses. Then dessert, of course."

His last words send a shiver down my spine. I hope *I'm* not dessert.

He leads me down a hall, past a wine refrigerator with glass doors and into the open floorplan kitchen.

A man with short dark hair in an all-black outfit stands at the counter beside the stove with his back to us, preparing our first dishes.

Beyond the cooking area, a table is set beautifully for two against a backdrop of absolutely stunning views of the city. The whole apartment—or at least what I can see of it—has floor to ceiling windows and sweeping city views. I would never get anything accomplished if I lived here, I'd spend

every moment sitting in one of the comfy-looking chairs with Marie in my lap, watching the city down below.

Marie squirms to let me know she wants down. I release her and she prances over to the white fluffy blanket that appears to have been set up for her by the window. She gets comfy and sits there watching us from her comfy perch.

“I see she hasn’t recovered from her bout of Stockholm after all,” I remark as Calvin pulls out a chair for me.

“Why should she?” He places a hand on my shoulder and I tense as he leans a little closer. “I’ve been treating her like a queen.”

I swallow and shrug off his grip before taking a seat. I bend to put my purse on the floor right beside me. I don’t want to get separated from it in case I need to use the pepper spray stashed inside.

“How was your day?” Calvin asks as he pulls out a chair and takes a seat across from me.

I take the white linen napkin and drape it across my lap, a little thrown by the casual way he asked that, as if I’m a real date instead of someone he essentially blackmailed into dinner. Does he really think I’ll interact with him as if we’re on a date? Is he completely crazy?

“Not great. Some lunatic stole my cat and nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Calvin looks at me across the table without the slightest gleam of remorse in his eyes. “I do what I have to do to get what I want, Hallie. It will serve you well if you remember that.”

I scoff a little, but it’s hardly funny. “And just give you what you want without a fight?”

“Oh, no.” His eyes gleam with darkness as he grabs the glass of wine in front of him and takes a sip. “I enjoy the fight. However, I think it will be less crushing for you if you realize sooner rather than later that you’re going to lose in the end.”

His arrogance rankles. “I won’t lose,” I tell him, reaching for my goblet of water, but then hesitating and looking between the glasses. I have wine and water, but both were poured before I got here.

He said he wouldn’t drug me, right? There was no fun in that for him. That’s what he said, and while he could have been lying, I’ve already decided he seems rather honest—horrible, but honest about being horrible.

There’s no reason for him to drug me, right? I’m here. He’s won this round.

I’m still unsure. I look up and see him watching me, apparently fascinated by my internal debate.

“Not sure you want to drink anything tonight?” he asks.

The amusement in his tone is infuriating. “No,” I answer a bit shortly. “I’m not sure if drinking something my rapist poured for me is a great idea.”

“Probably not,” he says, not even moved by my calling him a rapist. “I think you should do it anyway. You’ll get pretty thirsty if you don’t.”

I eye the glass of water since the liquid is clear. It should be easier to see residue if something was slipped in it, right? The liquid appears to be clear, no chalky residue at the bottom, no faintly colored waves on top. I glance at the wine and see nothing suspect warping the surface of that one, either.

I look him in the eye and ask, just to be sure. “Did you drug my drinks? You said you’d be honest, right? So you’ll tell me if you did.”

His lips curl up with amusement. A gleam lights his hard eyes, softening them just a bit. “I love when you try to evade me like this. I’m not sure why. I think I’d find it annoying if most people tried it, but you’re so goddamn earnest. I guess I like playing with my food before I eat it.”

That doesn’t fill me with confidence that he plans to let me leave here untouched.

I swallow, instinctively wanting to reach for the pepper spray, but this isn't the time.

"Do you remember what we talked about at the wedding?" he asks.

The steadiness of his dark-eyed stare is unnerving. Even as the chef walks over with our salads, his gaze doesn't flicker away from me. I've never been the object of someone's undivided attention like this, and I don't know how to process it. "I.. Yes, you said that—"

In a bout of utter fucking insanity, perhaps conditioning that runs too deep to be tossed aside when it clearly should be, I stop talking and my gaze flickers to the chef. I'm horrified to realize I stopped talking because I didn't want to say something incriminating about Calvin in front of a witness, and even more mortified when Calvin realizes the same thing.

He doesn't say anything right away. He watches me, his intrigue deepening. "Interesting."

It feels like I've swallowed my heart. I open my mouth to object to my own unthinking behavior, to take it back and explain that I wasn't looking out for him—that would be insane! But before I can utter a single word, he goes on.

"You don't have to worry, sweetheart. I've already explained to Chef Ryan that we're roleplaying tonight. He won't take any crazy thing you might say seriously."

Heat climbing up my neck and blooming on my cheeks, I raise my gaze to Ryan's, but I feel so embarrassed. Not for the reason he clearly believes I do, though, as he offers a reassuring smile and a wink to let me know he's not judging.

I know I've just inadvertently fucked myself. If I had any hope of appealing to him for help, I've just squashed it. Before I might have been able to convince him Calvin is a lunatic who made that all up to cover what he was actually doing, but if that were the case, he wouldn't be a lunatic I want to protect. He might eventually realize maybe I wasn't kidding—once I've been missing for a while and show up on the news.

“That wasn’t—” I stumble awkwardly over my words. “I didn’t—”

Calvin interrupts. “Have a drink of your wine, Hallie. I already told you that taking advantage of you while you’re passed out isn’t my kink, didn’t I?”

I don’t know if it’s my awkwardness, not knowing what to do, or the subtle tone of command in his voice, but I find myself reaching for the glass. I watch him over the rim as I take a sip, but he doesn’t appear to be impacted one way or the other by my taking a drink. That’s probably a good sign.

“Since you don’t look like you’ve won anything, I suppose that was the right choice,” I murmur.

“I suppose it was.”

I can’t tell if the wine tastes off. It’s a red, and I prefer white.

I swallow it, anyway.

A brief hit of desolation settles around my shoulders. I don’t like not knowing what to do, how to stay safe. I want to leave, and that compels a more honest question. “When can I go?”

He cocks a dark eyebrow as he pauses with his fork halfway to his salad. “We’ve just started eating.”

“Yes, but you’re forcing me to do all of this. If we can skip the meal and I can take Marie and go home, I’d like to do that as soon as possible.”

His prior warmth dissipates and a cool front sweeps in. “You’re not going anywhere, Hallie. We’re on the salad course. There are still three meal courses and a dessert to go.”

“And after that, can I leave?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” he answers coolly.

“What does that *mean*? How do you decide whether or not to further break a person?”

Calvin takes a sip of his wine, watching me in that unnerving way of his. As he replaces the glass on the table, he asks, “Do you know why we’re having three courses tonight, Hallie?”

A frown flickers across my face.

What does that have to do with anything?

He answers when I don’t. “We’re having three courses because the first taste of something is always the best. When the flavors are new and you don’t know how they’ll dance across your tongue. The second bite is good, too. Different from the first, but this time there’s anticipation. You know you’re going to like it, you’re eager to taste it again, and then you do. But what happens after that second bite? The excitement begins to fizzle. It’s all downhill from there. I like three small courses because you get the very best parts of the experience, and by the time you’re growing weary of it, it’s over and on to the next.”

My spine is rigid by the end of his speech and I’m gripping the fork so tightly, I’m shocked the metal doesn’t give. “Are you actually comparing me to a *meal*?”

“No. I’m telling you how it usually is for me. Now, I like a delicious meal as much as the next person, but no matter how good it is, thinking about it doesn’t keep me up at night. I’m not preoccupied with memories of the beautiful way it was spread out on the plate in front of me, I’m not driven to distraction remembering the smell, trying to recall the taste.”

He pauses, his gaze never leaving mine. It makes my chest feel heavy, and the feeling intensifies with his next words.

“So, when I tell you I haven’t decided yet, Hallie, I don’t mean I haven’t decided whether or not I’ll taste you again. That’s a foregone conclusion—I will, it’s only the ‘how’ and ‘when’ that are up for debate. And I’m only still pondering *that* because you *do* keep me up at night. I can’t put another meal on the table and forget about you. I don’t know why that is, but it doesn’t matter. I want you, plain and simple. I want your body in my bed, and I want your company, too—that’s new for me. I’ve always been a sexual person, but once my physical needs are met, I have no further

use for my playmates. It's different with you. I don't know if it's because of what I took from you, because it was different from my usual play... I don't know why. I also don't care. I want you, so I'll have you, but regardless of what you want to believe, I'm trying to accomplish that in the least damaging way possible. I don't enjoy *hurting* you. Your pain doesn't please me. I am not cruel. Spoiled, perhaps, but I take very good care of my toys. I'll take very good care of *you*, if you'll let me."

His words are a lot to take in. My mind is reeling trying to process all of it, trying to reconcile his intentions with my options.

If we'd met some other way, it would be easier to consider that there *are* options. It doesn't feel like there should be. The only sane, acceptable thing to do is get away from him and never look back.

The words feel thick on my tongue as I utter them without looking at him. "I don't need you to take care of me."

"I know," he says simply. Then, tempting me with something I had no idea I was interested in, he adds, "But wouldn't it be nice?"

He's crazy.

This isn't a date and there aren't any options.

If I'm not careful, I'll get sucked into his crazy way of thinking, and I don't even understand it. I don't understand why *he* feels so compelling when he's absolutely, utterly insane.

"Let go of convention, Hallie. Give yourself to me."

Chapter Eleven

Hallie

When I was a girl, my mom warned me that the devil would be beautiful.

She was a religious woman—especially after my father left—and all the Bible stuff freaked me out and made me afraid. I thought the devil would be scary and ugly, a frightening sight to behold. She told me it would be just the opposite. I would feel warm and vibrant in his presence, tempted beyond measure. The devil *has* to be beautiful and compelling in order to tempt you to stray from the path you know is right.

I think Calvin Cutler might be the devil.

It's such an absurd thought to have that a faint smile tugs at my lips as I drain my second glass of wine. I shouldn't have had a second glass, my head is starting to feel fuzzy and I know I can't afford not to have my wits about me, but with the alcohol coursing through my veins, I feel strangely good.

All my troubles feel so far away. Absurd, since one of them is sitting across from me, polishing off the last of his swordfish.

Swordfish. What a silly word.

My body feels heavier and lighter at the same time. I'm languid, slouching and rudely planting an elbow on the table so I can lean my head on it to hold me up. Why is my head so heavy?

Calvin's steady voice pierces the wine fog. "Are you feeling all right?"

God, he has a nice voice.

Wait, no.

I hate him. He's the devil.

Handsome, very handsome, but the *devil*.

"You're a bad man," I tell him, so he can remind me in case I forget again.

"All right," he says, not even seeming offended.

"I have to remember that."

"You don't *have* to," he says.

I don't?

No, wait. I can't trust what he tells me. He tells me crazy things, like let me take care of you, and I stay up at night thinking about you...

"What do you think about me?"

He regards me with a furrowed brow. "Hm?"

"The... you said you think about me when you're trying to sleep at night. Was that true?"

He nods.

"So, what do you think?"

There's nervous energy just below the foggy tiredness that just hit me, but Calvin is calm and collected, completely in control of himself as he answers steadily, "Lots of things. I think about your smile and how I'd like to see more of it. The different *kinds* of smiles you have. What does your intimate smile look like? What do you look like when you're darting a glance at someone you have a shared secret with?"

My head feels even more swimmy. "That's specific," I murmur.

"Mm-hmm." He pushes his chair back and stands.

I try to gather up my wits as he walks over to me, knowing I'll likely need them. "What are you doing?" I ask when he stops by my chair.

He offers his hand. "Dance with me."

"There's no music."

I only realize after the fact, that's not the reason I shouldn't dance with him.

And then suddenly there is music, and he's taking my hand and making me stand. It's harder than it should be. My legs are wobbly and I can't trust them. I can't trust him, either, but I find myself leaning on him so I don't fall.

My body warms once his heat is pressed against my front.

I shouldn't dance with him. I should sit back down. That's the right thing to do.

Abandon convention, Hallie.

His earlier sentiment echoes in my head. I don't think that's exactly what he said. Let go, I think that's what he said.

"I wonder if you would have danced with me at your friend's wedding without anyone watching."

His words cut through the fog in my mind, but the fog seems to be growing denser, my body heavier. I'm not really dancing with Calvin so much as using him to hold up my weight.

He doesn't seem to mind. He guides my arms around his neck and locks his arm around my waist, then he sways with me ever so slightly as the soft music plays in the background.

My body is so heavy.

So, so heavy.

My eyes drift closed. I'm resting my face against his shoulder, listening to the deep, calming tone of his voice. "I think about your lips and how they would feel wrapped around my cock. The look in your eyes when you know you're well and truly trapped. If I could draw tears out of you

when we're playing without breaking you altogether. If it will feel as good as I remember when I thrust deep inside that perfect, velveteen pussy of yours and spill my seed again and again until it takes root."

Wait, what?

I want to pull back. I try to, but I can't. My body isn't my own anymore.

Dimly, I feel him kiss my cheek, and then my jawline. I want to pull back, but for some reason, I... I can't.

Oh no.

"You lied," I say thickly, or I try to, but my words get a little lost. "You lied to me."

He said I could drink the wine, but I've been drunk on wine, drunker than two glasses, and I didn't feel like this.

He drugged me.

The fucker drugged me.

I look back at the table as Chef Ryan comes over to clear our third dinner course away. Dessert was supposed to be next, but he's taking the plates and the glasses. He looks like he's cleaning up after a finished meal, and we didn't have dessert.

I'm dessert.

I knew it, but I let myself believe him.

"Remember when you lied to me, sweetheart?" he asks almost gently, despite what I know he's doing.

"No." I do remember, but I'm not responding to that. The denial is for the vulnerable situation he's put me in. I need to get out of here, now, before the last of my wits have abandoned me.

Summoning all my strength, I yank my body away from him. I stumble and he grabs my waist, his grip like iron.

“Be careful,” he commands like I’m a child who just picked up a priceless antiquity on display in his home.

Only *I’m* the priceless treasure in this situation.

He’s afraid I’ll hurt me before he gets to.

I laugh at the absurdity, or I mean to, but my head is so thick and foggy, I can’t be sure any sound actually comes out.

“Let go of me.” I try to peel myself away from him, but it’s like trying to use a cooked spaghetti noodle to lift a car.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he tells me.

“You lied,” I say again.

“So did you,” he states plainly. “Remember when I told you I would hold you to your word? You said you would meet me for dinner, and you didn’t.”

“You’re a psycho.” I sway unsteadily, but he won’t let go. I don’t trust myself to walk, so I dig my nails into the back of his hand and scratch as hard as I can.

The bite surprises him for a split second, but it’s all I need to slip free.

I drop to my knees instantly without his support, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll crawl out of here if I have to, I just can’t let him...

My thoughts get lost in the fog. I can’t remember why, I can’t think straight anymore, I just know I have to get out of this apartment.

I want to, I need to, but my body feels so heavy and this apartment feels too big. Hopelessness threatens to swallow me, but I crawl forward as the edges of my vision start to darken and fade out.

I can’t let him catch me. I have to get away.

He steps in front of me. He feels like an immovable obstacle. His shiny, expensive loafer is pristine. The folds in the fabric of his pants won’t even dare wrinkle. I tilt my heavy head back and skim the muscular curve

of his thigh, then my gaze hits the bulge of his cock. He's already getting excited. He told me I was no good to him passed out.

He lied.

I don't know why that's so disappointing. Of course he lied. He's a monster.

He continues to lie, with that tender look in his eyes and the gentle way he reaches down and caresses my cheek.

I want to cry, but more than that, I want to sleep. My body is too heavy, and I can't fight, not like this.

"Please don't hurt me," I whisper.

I don't know what he says, or if he answers me at all.

My strength gives out and I collapse on the floor at his feet.

Thirsty.

I'm so fucking thirsty.

I'm aware of it even before I'm fully awake, caught in a haze between reality and a dreamless sleep, but searching for water all the same.

My head pounds. My mouth is so dry. I'm disoriented and nothing feels right.

Where am I?

Somewhere soft, but this doesn't feel like my bed. I shift and luxurious silk moves across my bare skin.

My bare skin.

I don't sleep naked.

I don't have silk sheets, either. A silk pillowcase to prevent my hair from getting too crazy, but not sheets.

I shift again and feel the cool silk pressed against my skin. It feels nice. So does the thick, plushy blanket draped on top of me.

This bed feels like heaven. So soft, so luxurious. I want to stay in it forever.

I turn and curl into the comfort, but something niggles at the back of my mind. Something urgent that tells me I shouldn't, that I need to get out of the bed and do something...

Horror clears away some of the fog when it hits me—I'm naked in a strange bed.

Why? Where was I?

Then it all starts to flood back in.

The picture isn't clear—each splintered memory is a broken shard I have to piece together. The dinner. Calvin. The twisted things he said to me as he waited for the strength to leave my drugged body.

My drugged body.

Oh, God.

The room is dark, so it must be night. I turn my head and start to sit up, but as soon as I do, pain throbs around my temples, making me so lightheaded I immediately lie back down.

The bed moves beside me. I turn my aching head and see Calvin lying there on his side of the bed. The blanket covering me up to my breasts is only draped across his hips, leaving his entire upper body exposed.

His *naked* upper body.

He's naked.

And so am I.

In his bed.

I can't remember anything. The last thing I remember is dancing with him, then I have a foggy recollection of crawling toward the gallery, trying to escape.

Obviously, I didn't make it.

I knew I wouldn't. He was right behind me.

Everything else is foggy. I don't know how I ended up here. All I know is I'm here with him in his bed, and my clothes are gone.

I feel for them just to be sure. My hand slides over my naked breast and the peak of my nipple. I run it down my stomach, and slide my fingers between my bare legs.

I squeeze my eyes closed when I feel nothing, not a single thread of fabric on my body.

He lied. He told me it wouldn't do anything for him to rape me while I was unconscious, but the bastard lied.

My heart feels so heavy, and I feel so, so stupid.

I should have known. I *did* know. I knew what would happen if I came here, but I had to come anyway. He had my cat.

Tears well up in my eyes, but they don't fall. It's just a little sadness, not a full on, dramatic cry.

I'm almost resigned, even though it has just hit me.

I knew this would happen, and now it has.

What I don't know is what happens next.

My mouth is so dry, I can't even focus on anything else. I don't want to ask him for anything, but I'm desperate. "Do you have water?"

Wordlessly, Calvin reaches for something on his bedside stand. Relief grips me when he uncaps a bottle of water and hands it to me.

“Thank you,” I murmur instinctively, then flinch because I *have* to stop thanking this asshole for things.

My body feels so much better as I gulp down half of the bottle. Even my head doesn’t seem to hurt as much. I’m irrationally afraid he won’t give it back if I don’t finish the whole thing, so I only stop to come up for air, then I gulp down the rest of it.

He takes the empty bottle and replaces the lid. “I take it you were thirsty.”

I don’t want to talk to him. He’s the only person who knows what happened to me, though, so on the off chance he tells the truth, I ask woodenly, “What did you do to me?”

Some part of me imagines he *will* tell me, but not because he’s honest.

Because he enjoys it.

Because he likes confessing perverse things when he knows I’m powerless to leave.

I’m prepared for it, so I don’t flinch when he says, “You passed out, so I picked you up and carried you in to bed.”

He says that like it’s a natural thing to do, like there was any chance I would have ended up in his bed of my own volition.

“Did I lose my clothes along the way?” I ask a bit dryly.

“No, but while the dress I picked out for you looked beautiful on, I figured it wouldn’t be comfortable to sleep in. Then, once I peeled that off, you looked so much more comfortable, I thought I’d keep going.”

“How gallant.”

His lips quirk ever so slightly. “Once I got your bra off, your lovely tits were just begging for attention...”

Here it comes...

I swallow.

The bedding rustles as he moves closer to me. I stiffen, but don't immediately pull away when he peels back the soft blanket that was covering my boobs.

My nipples harden the instant they're exposed to the cool air. They're hard when he reaches over and takes one between his thumb and forefinger like it belongs to him.

"You have truly remarkable tits, Hallie." He says it like we're lovers and I'll enjoy the compliment as much as his touch. I try to shove his hand away, but his grip on my nipple tightens painfully when I do, and the pressure increases until I stop. To reward me for giving in, I suppose, he lets go and rubs the pad of his thumb across my abused nipple, then he bends down and gives it a little kiss.

A wicked tingle dances down my spine, but I refuse to feel guilty for it. I have very sensitive breasts. It's not my fault they respond to physical stimulation. That doesn't mean anything. The tautening of my tummy muscles... it doesn't mean anything.

His hand leaves my breasts and skims the gentle curve of my bare tummy. "I enjoyed looking at your body, knowing you couldn't stop me. I wanted to see more of it." His finger grazes the line across my hips where my panties should be. I squeeze my legs together, but he still runs his hand over my thigh, then reaches around and grabs my ass. "I wanted to taste you, Hallie. I wanted to feel your soft skin beneath mine. I wanted to fuck you, and remember, I'm a man who takes what he wants."

There it is. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to swallow past a lump in my throat. I knew, but it still hurts to hear.

"But..."

My heart stops.

But?

I'm so surprised, I stop clenching my muscles as tightly and his hand slips between my thighs. He cups my pussy in the palm of his hand and

leans so close, I feel his breath on my skin as he murmurs, “Right before you passed out, you asked me for a favor. Do you remember that?”

I swallow, but that lump is still lodged stubbornly in my throat as I shake my head.

“You asked me not to hurt you. You said please.” Between my legs, his finger lightly traces shapes over my entrance. I realize my body doesn’t *feel* like he’s been inside me. There’s no ache like there was the last time. No lubrication if he used it so as not to hurt me while I was passed out.

My tummy flutters. I don’t know if it’s the way his finger grazes my entrance, or the hope his words give me. “You... you didn’t...?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t fuck you. I didn’t even taste you beyond a few kisses.”

Relief reinflates me and I feel as if I can finally breathe again.

“I thought about it,” he confesses. “I’ve never fucked an unconscious woman before. It didn’t *seem* appealing, but then *you* were lying here naked in my bed. If you hadn’t asked me so sweetly to control myself, I might not have.”

I gasp as he uses his fingers to spread my pussy open and quickly squeeze my legs together before he can push one into me. His body is getting closer, so I brace a hand on his muscular chest and push him away. “Calvin...”

He lets go of my pussy and repositions. I know I should get out of the bed, but before I can put that thought into action, he peels back the blanket and exposes my bare body to the cool night air. Then he climbs on top of me, and the moment I feel his hardening cock pressed against my leg, I know what I was so relieved didn’t happen *will* happen if I don’t find a way to stop him.

“Wait. Wait, please,” I say quickly, my mind racing for some way to stall him.

Calvin catches my hand, then dips his head and softly kisses the sensitive skin of my wrist. "I've waited long enough, Hallie."

"No. No, wait. Please," I add more urgently, a little more sweetly since that seems to be what he responds to.

He hesitates.

I grab onto it. "Please, Calvin," I say softly, looking up at him.

He cocks his head and looks down at me, then softly strokes the side of my face. "God, you're beautiful."

My heart flutters. It's the way he says it. Not even deliberate, just an unguarded thought that escaped his lips.

My heart hammers once it starts beating again. I don't know what I'm doing or what might work, but following some instinct I don't even fully understand, I lift his hand from my face and slowly, carefully turn it so I can kiss *his* wrist. Then his palm. He sucks in a breath when I do, obviously not prepared for tenderness from me.

I'm not sure what I'm doing, but it feels good. My mind resists—*I shouldn't be kissing him. He's bad, I know he's bad*—but my body knows what to do. I kiss him the way he talks about me—like he's something precious to me. I know how much it throws *me* off, so maybe it will do the same to him.

At worst, I suppose he might think I'm a lunatic, but I already think that about him, so why should it matter what *he* thinks about *me*?

"What if... what if we move slow?" I ask.

"Slow," he reiterates, a tinge of curiosity in his tone.

"You can take it from me right now if you want to. I can't stop you. I could try to run, but you'll catch me. You'll... you'll pin me down, maybe on the floor beside your bed and have your way with me right there if that's what you want to do."

His dark eyes heat with desire.

Of course he likes that scenario.

I swallow past my doubts and keep talking. “But there are things you can’t do that way. Things you can’t take.” To emphasize my point, I place another tender kiss against the palm of his hand.

“I’m listening,” he says.

I caress the back of his hand with my fingers and let my lips linger against his skin. I need to think through what I’m about to say one more time before I let it out into the world because I think it’s fucking crazy—no, I *know* it’s fucking crazy—but it’s the least painful way I can realistically envision this night going.

I look up at his face to gauge his reaction to what I’m about to say. “You want a second taste. The first and second are the best, like you said at dinner. So you already had the first taste, and you had it your way. You trapped me in that dungeon, you stripped away my will, and you violated my body because that was what you wanted. But, because of the way you did that, there was stuff you didn’t get to experience. Maybe that’s why you’re still thinking about it. Maybe it’s just the missing pieces. The things you can’t have.”

His eyes narrow in consideration.

“So, tonight, what if we do that other stuff? And maybe it will lead to sex, I don’t know. That’s crazy, it definitely shouldn’t, but maybe it will. I’ll be open-minded. I’ll listen to my body. If it wants something crazy... maybe just for this one night, I’ll do something crazy. But if I don’t, if I say no, you have to respect that. You have to stop and let me leave. Those are my terms.”

“What is included in this ‘other stuff’ package?”

Somehow, the answer seems scarier than waking up in a strange bed. “All the normal parts of physical intimacy. We’ll kiss. We’ll touch. We can explore each other’s bodies, but only within the confines of consent. The moment I ask you to stop, you have to respect that or the whole thing is off.”

He doesn't bother telling me that I can withdraw my consent at any time and he can ignore it all he wants—I know that, but he doesn't say it.

My confidence in this plan grows. If I don't think about it too hard, it feels like a good plan. A plan where everybody wins... or, at least, nobody loses more than they can afford to.

Of course, it hinges on him *wanting* to kiss me, wanting my tenderness, but now that I've given him a little sample of it, I think he does.

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Chapter Twelve

Calvin

She's so goddamn hopeful as she looks up at me, awaiting my decision.

I think that's what does it.

She's asking me for the most basic level of decency—just to let her have a say in what happens to her—and she isn't angry about it just because she's entitled to be. She's sweet and soft and flexible, offering up things that shouldn't be on the menu for me and saying they can be, if I'll just compromise a little bit.

I don't tell her that I've had dozens of boring sexual encounters with women before her that included all that nice, normal stuff and it never did much for me. In fact, I don't even *like* kissing—not on the mouth, anyway.

But I do like the light of hope in her eyes. I like what she's doing now, too. I've had plenty of passion-laced kisses from women who wanted them much more than I did, but none of them moved me even a little bit. I'm more moved by the soft, sweet, wordless pleading in those little kisses she's offering up, and she's only kissing my *hand*.

Imagine how that would feel on my cock.

Maybe it's not precisely what *I'm* into, but that doesn't mean I won't like it when I'm doing it with her. I have a strong hunch I could like just about anything as long as she's the one I'm doing it with.

There's also a place deep down where I know with alarming certainty that this woman isn't like any of the ones that have been through my revolving door. I don't know why, it isn't a logical thing, but I know she'll be around for a while. And I *want* her to be. And while I don't normally

date women, I know if I *want* to date one, I'll have to make some compromises.

Kissing those perfect lips of hers while my hands roam her naked, squirming body isn't much of a compromise, but I want an even better offer, so I don't tip my hand.

"I'm open to it, but I have terms of my own."

Her eyes dim a little, but she nods, eager to work with me. "Okay. What did you have in mind?"

She's so goddamn adorable. I want to stroke her again, my treasured little pet, but I don't. This is negotiating time. "Regardless of how tonight ends, I want a guarantee of a third date."

"A third date."

"I'll count the wedding as the first and tonight as the second. I want a third."

"The wedding... we weren't even there together."

"We talked, we had a drink." When she still seems unconvinced, I tell her, "All right, we can call tonight date one and then you'll owe me two."

Realizing she was arguing against herself, she shakes her head. "No, no. Okay, you're right, the wedding can count as... a first date." She struggles to get that out, but moves past it quickly once she does. "No matter how tonight goes, I'll agree to one more."

"No matter what," I state more firmly. "And I'll hold you to it, Hallie. I don't like liars, and I damn sure don't like when *you* lie to me. If you renege on our deal one more time, all bets are off. I'll take you and keep you locked up in my bedroom until I'm finished with you. I'll rape you every goddamn night and force you to sleep next to me until morning. Maybe I'll have another go at you then. I'll tie you up if I have to. I'll kiss the tears from your cheeks and thrust even harder as the ropes rub against your agitated skin just to be spiteful. I won't stop until I feel like stopping, no

matter how much you beg. I'll destroy you, Hallie. You can bank on it. Don't try to call my bluff. I don't bluff."

Her blue eyes are wide by the time I'm finished. Her grip on my hand has tightened, which I find a bit funny. She's gripping my hand as if I might protect her against... well, me.

Dread casts a shadow across her lovely features. She swallows. More hesitant than a moment ago when she swore to the same thing, she reiterates the terms. "No matter what? So, even if you break all of my rules tonight, you'll still hold me to yours."

"Yes," I state unflinchingly. "Those are the only terms I'll agree to. Even if I wrench your thighs apart and drive into your unwilling body the moment the sound of agreement falls from your lips, you will show up to a third date with me."

I can feel the fear in her heart. She's afraid I'm cornering her just to pounce, that if she agrees, that's exactly what will happen. Why shouldn't it? There are no consequences for me if I break the rules.

But there are. There are always consequences when rules are broken, especially in this instance when what I want more than anything is to see her again.

I *want* to be able to trust her. I *can* kidnap her little ass and brutally use her body to slake my lusts until I don't lust for her anymore. If she's too difficult, if that's her preference, it's what I'll have to do. Whatever the reason, I'm too far gone with this girl to let it go and move on. I have to possess her in every way a man can possess a woman. I have to bury myself inside her until I've conquered and memorized every corner of her, but I need *access* to her in order to properly explore her.

I'll steal it if I have to, but I'm a reasonable man. I'll give her the chance to be agreeable first.

She has to mean it, though.

If she lies to me again, there will be consequences.

“If I... if I show up a third time, will you promise to let me leave? Will you promise not to hurt me?”

“No.”

Because I say no when I could easily say yes, she knows it's the truth.

She swallows. “But... that's not fair.”

“I didn't say it was.”

“You aren't giving me what I need out of this.”

“And what's that?”

“Safety. I have to know that, even if you...” She can't say the word as easily as I can. She stumbles over it, then switches to a different phrase. “Even if you force yourself on me, you won't hurt me to the point that I can't leave. You won't... you won't kill me.”

She blurts out the last of it with the sort of momentum that I can tell it's not the first time the thought has crossed her mind.

Is that what she's afraid of?

I suppose I shouldn't be stunned. Of course it has crossed her mind I could be more dangerous than she has experienced thus far. I likely *could*, but I haven't, so at least I can set her mind at ease about that. “I've never murdered anyone, Hallie. I don't intend to harm you, not that way.”

“That's not a promise.”

“All right.” I pause to consider my wording. “I won't promise not to hurt you. I have a hunger for you that I'm going to satisfy, whether you consent or you don't. But I will promise not to hurt you beyond repair. I don't mean mentally, I can't entirely control your mental state, but I won't take your life from you. I would never take that.”

Still wary, she adds, “And you wouldn't hire the syringe guys or anyone else to do it, either?”

My lips tug up at the corners. “No.”

She wants to trust me. Not because she's invested in me the way I'm invested in her, but because I have more power here, and she'll never get a moment's peace as long as I'm lurking around the corner unless she can believe the things I say.

I'm sure she'd rather be rid of me altogether, but she's realizing that's not an option, and I like the way she's handling it.

"All right," she says, her tone alerting me before her words that I've won. "I'll agree to your terms."

"And I'll agree to yours," I tell her.

She nods, but not with much confidence. And why would she? I just manipulated the entire situation so that I can do whatever I want to her tonight, and she still has to give me one last chance to do it again.

I'm tempted to, too. Not because I lack self-control, but because I need to test out her word. I went into this thinking she was more or less trustworthy, but since she considered me someone not worth being honest with, we've had a couple of bumps. In order to get her where I want her, I have to know she will hold up her end of the bargain even if I don't.

But I also need to build her confidence in me. It's okay if she thinks I'm a lunatic, but she has to know my word means something.

I did mean what I said, and I will kidnap her and keep her locked up in my room if she makes me, but I'm realistic. I know that path can't end well, not for her. If I clip her wings and cage her, if I abuse her and break her spirit, she won't really recover. I'll remain true to my word and let her go, but she'll never fly again.

I don't want to break her; I just want to play with her.

But I must possess the *power* to break her if I wanted to. She has to know I do, and she has to trust me enough to give it to me anyway.

It's a tall order, one that requires a lot of bravery on her part.

If I expect her to fill it, she has to know she's safe with me.

Well, more or less.

Her pussy isn't safe, but the rest of her is.

Her pussy likes when I play with it, anyway.

Her pussy isn't as worried about conventionality as she is.

To prove my point, I reposition myself so that I'm on top of her but no longer pinning her down. I slide my hand between her legs. She gasps at first and tries to squeeze them shut, but it's a momentary lapse, an instinct she hasn't learned to override yet.

She'll have to. If she means to let the predator play with her, she'll have to ignore all those sensible instincts that tell her not to.

The muscles in her legs relax as she forces herself to calm down. Her chest rises and falls quickly, her breathing so laborious. She closes her eyes like she can't watch herself let me do this, but as soon as I cup her pussy in my hand, it's like a kitten purring against my palm. I use light touches to tease her slit. I love watching her body react, tensing and twisting as she tries to move away from the pleasurable sensations she wants no part of.

Or, she doesn't *want* to want any part of.

Her body has no such qualms, it's an uncomplicated thing concerned with its own pleasure and not much else. When I finally sink a finger into her pussy, it comes out drenched. An agonized sound slips out of her as I plunge it back in so easily, her pussy slick with its own juices.

I wonder what that feels like. *Shame*. Such a senseless emotion, but I've never been caught in its grasp. I wonder if deep down, it makes the agony just a little more delicious as her body writhes and tries to turn away from my touch.

It's the shame that makes her so embarrassed when she comes for me. I didn't call her on it—I didn't want to humiliate her—but I felt her pussy squeeze my cock when I had her in the dungeon. I know she didn't want it, but she came just the same.

I fucking love that.

I want her to come for me now. To see her pleasure, and to see if she reacts the same way.

Suddenly, I'm hit with an idea.

I think I can build her confidence in me and test her word at the same time.

And, if I'm right, it'll be a damned good time—whether she likes it or not.

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Chapter Thirteen

Hallie

It's hard to hold his gaze when he touches me like this.

The frisson of pleasure that curls through me against my own will makes it so much worse.

I want to tap already. I want to ask him to stop, but I'm afraid if I don't make *some* allowance he can live with, he'll disregard my consent altogether.

Fully dressed in an expensive, perfectly tailored suit, Calvin is imposing. Somehow, kneeling on his bed in the dark with his toned, muscular body completely bare makes him look even more powerful.

I haven't encountered that before. I remember the first time I saw Jackson in a suit—my own personal catnip—how attractive I found him. Then I remember the end of our fifth date when we went back to his place. I remember feeling a bit letdown—*not that I would ever express that to him, of course*—when he hopped across the floor toward the bed, tangled up in the leg of his pants. I remember he looked pale and scrawny and awkwardly hairy. I didn't expect him to look like an athlete or anything, but as much as he bragged about the time he spent in the gym and how he did rowing in college, I guess I expected something... different.

I remember how impatient he seemed before he even got naked. The clumsy way he grabbed at my clothing to remove it, the brief, sloppy kiss I got before he hauled me to the bed.

It makes me wish I'd been awake when Calvin undressed me. He didn't let me experience it for myself, but instinctively, I envision him as a firm, decisive undresser. I picture him patient, too, knowing how to draw out anticipation and knowing the journey is half the fun. If I close my eyes,

I can imagine his sure grip as he gently tugs down the zipper on the back of the dress. I envision him gripping my shoulders to keep me exactly where he wants me, then tugging the expensive dress down and letting it pool on the floor at my feet.

My body feels more alive than it usually does. I keep my eyes closed, keep myself immersed in my imaginary world with a Calvin who is maybe a little charming, maybe someone I spend time with because I want to and not because I'm forced to.

The panic subsides as I reassure myself with the pretty lies in my imagination. It feels a little twisted to trick myself that way, and especially to use him in the fantasy, but I needed to do something to keep my chest from caving in. I needed to buy myself at least a little time before I asked him to stop.

I don't want to stop now. Not yet. Without the panic clawing at my chest, I can focus on how nice it feels as he strokes my clit. Pleasure starts at my core and spreads outward.

The pure, uncomplicated feeling of receiving pleasure can't last long, though. The guilt catches up to me. Reality pierces my bubble and reminds me how sordid this is.

Discomfort seeps in and ruins everything.

I want him to stop touching me, but I don't want to *tell* him to stop and trigger... whatever will happen if I tell him to stop.

Sensing gentleness is the best way to approach him, I reach down and wrap my fingers around his wrist. He stops, but only for a second to see what I want.

My heart flutters at the knowledge that for just this moment, I have a bit of power here. If I don't do anything with it, I have little doubt he'll go back to disregarding my wants, but when I actually express myself... I don't know, it seems like he's more responsive. It's a twisted thing to consider a favor or an allowance, but when I asked him not to hurt me, he didn't.

Taking advantage of this fleeting opportunity to guide what happens next, I reach for him and pull gently. His eyes narrow in consideration, but he's curious enough to see what I want. He takes his hand from between my legs and lets me guide him closer. When he's on top of me, our bodies skin against skin, his face mere inches away, I wonder if I've made the wrong choice.

The problem is, there are no *right* choices here.

I swallow and summon what's left of my courage. I reach up and tentatively caress his hard jaw, then I lean up just a little, and he leans down.

Our lips meet and a thrill shoots through me. It's not the good kind of thrill, the kind you get when something amazing happens. It's the kind you get when you're standing on the edge of a mountain and the earth gives beneath your feet. The feeling you only get for a split second before the ground beneath you crumbles and you plunge to your death.

Terrifying. Consuming.

He's not patient like I imagined when he kisses me. He sweeps in and sucks the breath from my lungs, invading my mouth, demanding more than I want to give him.

I should have known he'd do that.

I shouldn't be kissing him.

This was a bad idea.

Panic creeps back in. As his tongue sweeps into my mouth and leaves my thoughts a windblown mess, my chest seems to shrink. It gets harder and harder to breathe.

I stop kissing him and try to pull back, but I'm already pinned to the mattress beneath his weight. "Wait," I murmur against his mouth. He still kisses my lips like the taste he got was just a tease and he intends to take more. "Please," I say, turning my head away to create distance in the only way I can.

“We’ve only just begun,” he tells me.

“I know.” The panic gets heavier. I’m tapping too early. He won’t be satisfied. He won’t stop here. “I know, I’m sorry.”

My apology softens him, I can see it. I’m too panicked to entirely process it, though. I’m preoccupied envisioning a bad response. Him flipping me over and holding my face in the pillow as he forces himself between my thighs. It was fun to play at romance, but I wasn’t a fun enough playmate; now he’ll just take what he wants and be done with it.

After all, I still have to come back one more time to let him do it again.

My stomach is so upset, it rocks. This future feels absolutely inevitable given what he did to me in the dungeon, so when I look up at him, tears glint on the surface of my eyes and I’m not above begging. “Please. I’m sorry.”

A shock of warmth takes me off guard when his hand touches my face. He cups it in his hand almost tenderly, then he leans down and presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

“Calm down,” he commands.

His tone is firm, but gentle.

He seems so sure of himself, so unafraid, so opposite of everything I’m feeling in this moment, and it makes me feel... strange. I want to be closer to it. I want to sink into it and believe as he seems to that everything is okay.

My stomach sinks just considering what I’m about to do, but he’s still above me, so sure and so strong, and I want to disappear for a moment. Following some instinct I don’t quite understand, I tentatively wrap my arms around him, burrow my face into the crook of his neck, and take shelter somewhere I’m not even sure I’m welcome.

He’s strong and hard, but his skin is so warm, so smooth beneath my lips as I absently press them against the curve of his shoulder. There’s

nowhere else to seek comfort. He's my aggressor, but also the only available sanctuary.

The low grumble of his voice soothes my frayed nerves. "What are you feeling?"

"Confused," I answer honestly. "Afraid."

"Afraid of me?"

I nod into his neck.

"Of what I'll do to you?"

My heart thuds in my chest and I nod again.

"Which one scares you more?"

I frown. "What do you mean? Both. They're basically the same thing."

"They're not. Are you most afraid of me, or what I might do to you?" When I don't immediately answer his confusing question, he adds, "I might suggest that since you're currently clinging to me for safety, you aren't as afraid of *me* as what I'll do to you."

I guess that makes sense. Something inside whispers that I should be embarrassed to be clinging to him for safety, but the strong sense that he welcomes it makes me not so embarrassed. He likes it, and if I can give him something he likes that isn't sex, that seems like the way to go.

Since my thighs are spread with his knees planted on the bed between them, he has excellent access. He lets me continue to hide in the crook of his neck with my arms wrapped around his body, but he reaches between my legs again and runs his finger over my entrance. I don't want it to, but it feels nice. He does it again and again and again, until finally, he uses his fingers to gently spread my pussy. He doesn't push a finger into me immediately, just holds me open and vulnerable. I feel the cool air on parts of my pussy cool air doesn't typically touch and that lets me know just how open I am.

“I want to taste this,” he murmurs, but makes no move to enact that desire, so I don’t panic. “I want to put handcuffs on you so your hands are forced over your head and I want to climb between your legs. I want you squirming and reluctant so I can grip these pretty thighs so tightly, you’ll have bruise marks from my fingers the next day. I want to touch you and lick you and fucking devour this pussy. I want you coming so many times your voice gives out and between broken cries, you beg me to stop, even while some small part of you prays I’ll disregard the request and keep going.”

My mouth feels suddenly dry. I swallow, then lick my dry lips, but I stay hidden and don’t respond.

“Then, once I’ve made you come again, I want to shove my cock into this pretty, swollen pussy and abuse it some more. You’ll have come so many times, you won’t be able to handle the friction. Every thrust will be excruciating on your over stimulated nerves. You’ll beg me to stop, but I won’t. This pussy belongs to me now, and I’ll use it as much as I please. I’ll drive into your poor, abused little pussy until, impossibly, you feel the pleasure building again. It doesn’t feel like any pleasure you’ve ever known before, though. It isn’t even something you anticipate. It’s something you dread. It feels like a tsunami approaching the shore and you know there’s no chance you’ll survive it.”

I gasp as he slides a finger deep inside me, touching parts of me he has no right to.

“And make no mistake, Hallie, when you come that time, it will break you. You’ll be in pieces in the aftermath, your body more spent than you thought humanly possible. You’ll be drained and so exhausted you can’t move, but I’ll move you. I’ll pull you into my arms and let you settle in. You’ll feel safe there, even though I’m the one who broke you. You’ll trust me to put you back together, and I will. I’ll rebuild you and make you whole again, that way I can do it all over again some other night.”

My heart pounds in the wake of the picture he just painted for me. He toys with my pussy as he paints this picture of my decimation, and I’m

afraid that means he plans to deliver on it tonight. I'm not sure I wanted the warning.

"Do you think you can handle that?" he asks.

"No," I whisper honestly.

I can't see him nod, but I can feel it. That's the answer he expected. "No," he says in agreement. "You're not ready for that yet, are you?"

I don't think I'll ever be ready for that, but I don't say so.

"You need me to go easy on you, don't you?"

My voice is small. "Yes."

He pushes his thumb into me. While his finger explores the depths of my pussy, his thumb moves to my clit. I gasp at the burst of sensation as he circles the sensitive little nub, then roughly runs his thumb over it.

"Just once, then," he murmurs. "You'll come for me once tonight. I promise not to take more than that, but I want you to stay until morning."

The muscles in my thighs quiver as he strums my clit almost absently while he talks to me.

"I work in the morning, but you can make me breakfast."

My whole body shudders as he plays with me, casually winding me so tight I might snap while he makes our morning plans.

"Can you cook?" he asks, almost as an afterthought.

"Y-yes," I say, but it's half whimper as he increases the pressure on my clit and keeps circling.

I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. Instinctively, I shift my hips to try to dislodge him and stop the desperate pleasure.

"Good," he murmurs, ignoring my attempt to flee and continuing to tease my clit. "You're welcome to stay here until I get home, too. I can have

Chef Ryan make us dinner again.” His voice turns mischievous. “If you never leave, it can still count as the same date.”

Struggling to hold on, I drop back against the bed and reach overhead, though I don’t know for what. Something to hold onto, something that isn’t him.

He’s like a vampire, feeding on my pleasure the same way he feeds on my fear. He smiles down at me, then pushes on my hip that keeps lifting off the bed and holds me down while he fingers me.

“Your body is a modern fucking marvel, do you know that?” he asks. “If I could be inside it all the time, I would. I’m tempted to right now. I know how easy it would be to grab your hips and push into you. To ignore your cries and your pleas and drive into you harder and harder until I explode inside this absolutely fucking perfect pussy.” He leans down and murmurs wickedly, “Like last time. Do you remember?”

It’s a brutal thing to do, reminding me of *that* when he knows how close my body is to betraying me.

“Were you worried when I came inside you, Hallie? Did you think about it later when you were at home in your bed?”

The pressure builds despite his horrible words. Despite the awful memory he is taunting me with. My legs shake as I try to hold on. I claw at the bed sheets and squeeze my eyes shut.

I feel him move closer. He’s so close I feel the heat rolling off his body, then he leans in and murmurs near my ear, “Do you remember how hard you came as I drove into your pussy, sweetheart?”

My blood freezes in my veins at the absolute perversion of that last remark. “You bastard,” I whisper.

He grabs my throat, causing my heart to sink with fear as he jams his fingers into me harder, faster. “Bastard, huh?” His voice is rough, but his fingers are rougher.

My eyes fly open. Everything intensifies. Pleasure and tension twist together inside me and pull tight. I grab his wrist, as if I can stop him if he really means to harm me.

“If I’m a bastard, I should just fuck you right now. That’s what I want to do. A bastard would take what he wants regardless of how you feel about it, wouldn’t he?”

Along with all the other tumultuous sensations assaulting my body, my stomach sinks.

The threat should douse the helpless sensations shooting through me, covering my naked body with a thin sheen of perspiration and turning my muscles to jelly.

They should, but they don’t.

His firm grip on my throat tightening until it scares me, Calvin leans in and practically growls, “Mark my words, Hallie. I will fuck your cunt raw tonight unless you come for me *right now*.”

A broken cry slips out of me as my body convulses on command. Ecstasy rushes in and washes over all the icky, awful feelings. It dims the edges of my vision, turns all my thoughts into a fog of bright white light. Relief shudders through my body as Calvin gently withdraws his finger. His grip on my throat eases, though he doesn’t remove it altogether. It becomes more of a caress than a threat.

He looks so pleased with me.

Sliding his other hand beneath my skull and cradling me, he presses a kiss to my forehead and says, “Oh, Hallie. You’re such a good girl.”

I don’t know what to think, what to feel. A moment ago I thought he might kill me, now he’s nuzzling me like I’m something precious to him.

I also don’t know what comes next. I did what he told me to, but he didn’t get to come, so will he do what he threatened anyway? It’s what he wants, and he takes what he wants.

But he doesn't. Not this time. He moves off me and settles in on his side of the bed, then he reaches over and drags me closer.

I've never been in a situation like this before. If we were a normal couple in bed after sex, I could let him pull me close. I would wrap my arm around him and snuggle up to him like a lover.

We aren't lovers, but I have no other frame of reference for what to do here.

When he wraps his strong arms around me and pulls me into the sanctuary of his bare chest, I let him.

When he kisses my forehead and then settles in as if we're going to go to sleep, I relax against him.

We aren't lovers, but when he holds me like this, it's easy to imagine we are.

Chapter Fourteen

Hallie

When my eyes open the following morning, a faint fog hangs over me. It feels like I had a little too much to drink last night, but since I know I didn't, I assume I'm feeling the effects of being drugged.

Even more disturbing, the strong arm locked around my waist and the hot, hard length pressed against my backside? All parts belonging to the man who drugged me.

I've gotta get out of here.

I feel like Alice waking up in Wonderland after a night she either doesn't entirely remember, or one she wishes she could forget. All I want to do is gather my things and run as fast as I can back to that rabbit hole. I'll claw my way back out of it if I have to, I just need to feel my feet on solid ground again.

Hoping he's a heavy sleeper but not knowing for sure, I take my sweet time very carefully lifting the blanket underneath his hand and slowly moving out from under it, inch by inch until I can ease myself off the bed.

If he stays asleep, I can find my clothes and my cat and get the hell out of here without having to face him again.

That seems impossible. He seems too present in this room that smells like him and feels like him, that chokes me with his presence and seems utterly inescapable.

And yet, I'm able to slip out unnoticed.

When I get on the other side of the door, I pause because it doesn't feel right.

Last night when I tried so desperately to escape, I couldn't. This morning all I have to do is slip out while he sleeps?

But I don't waste time questioning my good fortune. I'm too busy searching all over the place for my clothes. Marie was easy, she is snoozing peacefully in the little blanket bed he made for her, but as I move carefully through every room but his bedroom, I realize he must have brought my clothes in there.

I stop and look at the door, the thick mahogany with its perfect, gleaming ridges. I can't shake the feeling that he's awake on the other side, even though he hasn't come out yet. Perhaps it's paranoia, but I don't want to miss my chance to leave.

I can't very well leave naked, either, so I do the only thing I can think of—grab Calvin's coat out of his coat closet. It's long and black, thick wool that can easily cover my nakedness if I pull it closed. I do, and I'm absolutely swimming in it, but it doesn't matter. I'm not trying to make a fashion statement, I'm just trying to get out of here before I'm caught. Closing the coat around me tightly and snatching Marie from her blanket bed, I make my way to the door as quietly as I can. I still feel like I'll get caught before I manage to leave, but when the elevator doors close and I'm inside, I finally breathe a little easier.

Snuggling Marie close and kissing the side of her face, I tell her, "We made it, girl."

She tilts her head to look up at me, not remotely convinced that leaving was an emergency.

I ignore that and pretend she's totally on my side.

I won't feel *entirely* like I'm able to relax until we're out of his building, but when the doors open to the lobby, he's not standing there—somehow dressed in a suit already—with his arms crossed over his broad shoulders giving me a very unimpressed look as I attempt to flee.

I'm in the clear.

It feels too easy, but I make my way to the door. A different doorman is on duty today, and to his credit he doesn't even blink seeing me rush out with my hair all a mess, a cat clutched in my arms, and a man's jacket hanging off my body. I must look stark raving mad, but he simply smiles and opens the door for me.

I thank him and pass through the doorway urgently, lending even more evidence to the appearance that I'm mad.

I stop on the sidewalk, aware of the sudden—almost reassuring—noise of the bustling city. It restores a bit of normalcy. People cross the sidewalk in front of me, not seeing or not caring what I look like.

Moments ago I felt like I was one wrong move away from being a rich man's captive, but out here on the busy New York City sidewalk, I'm a normal person again, and Calvin Cutler is just a really bad dream I need to finish shaking off. I'm awake. I'm free.

It was too easy.

Getting a cab probably won't be. Not only because I look like I've just escaped an asylum and probably can't pay, but I also have a cat with me.

Marie looks around at the sights. I don't usually bring her outside unless we're going to the vet, so she side eyes me like I'd better not even try it.

"We're going home," I tell her.

I'm not sure if she's the one who needs to hear it or I am, but I hold onto her and start making my way down the sidewalk. It's too far to walk all the way to my place, but I'll worry about hailing a cab once I've put some distance between us and Calvin's building.

I had to walk for several blocks before I finally managed to hail a cab. My feet are killing me after walking so far in heels and Marie started to get heavy after a while.

I'm exhausted in just about every way a person can be when I enter my apartment building. All I want in the world is to lock myself in my apartment where I can imagine I'm safe, strip Calvin's clothing off my body, and take a scalding hot shower. I need to feed Marie first. I don't even know if she had dinner last night at Calvin's.

What an ordeal all that was.

"Don't worry," I murmur, caressing Marie's fur and placing a kiss on the nearest spot my face can reach. "We only have to see him one more time, then we can put him behind us."

That reassurance is definitely for me, not Marie. She'll never see him again; it's not like I'm going to take her with me to whatever this last "date" is.

I cringe thinking of it as a date.

I try to ignore the unease because even though he assured me when I was trapped beneath his spell that he wouldn't kill me, he seems like the last man I should trust. Am I crazy to fulfill my promise to see him one more time? I got away. Every instinct I have is screaming that if I managed to get away from him this time, I should never go back.

There's a cloud of uncertainty following that reasonable impulse, though.

What will he do if I don't?

I tell myself he probably won't do anything. A sane man wouldn't, but I'm not convinced he's entirely sane. At his apartment I felt pulled into his crazy with him, but the sobriety of daylight and distance away from him...

I don't know.

I'm more confused than I've ever been, but he's a pretty unorthodox man.

Attempting to shove every last thought of Calvin Cutler out of my mind so he doesn't pollute my personal space, I dig my keys out of my purse and round the corner to approach my apartment.

I stop dead a few feet away.

Questioning my sanity, I check the number hung there in gold, flaky paint.

Am I on the right floor?

I know I am, and the gold flaky numbers indicate this is, in fact, apartment 804, but... and I feel nuts thinking this, but, *that is not my door*.

My steps slow, but I still move closer.

As I do, my confusion grows. I glance down the hall and see the same stain on the carpet just past my door, the same passive-aggressive note from the landlord hanging up on the bulletin board at the end of the hall—the same sights I see literally every single day that I have lived at this apartment.

Just not my door.

I don't really know what's going on or what I'm supposed to do, but I desperately want to be inside that apartment, so I try my key.

It doesn't work.

What the hell is happening?

Did my landlord change the locks on me? That doesn't make any sense. I'm not behind on my rent, and even if he wanted to evict me, he would have to serve me an eviction notice first.

Marie meows and looks down. She probably recognizes this is where we live and wants to know why we aren't going inside, but I don't have an answer for her.

Now that I'm looking around again, I realize the door isn't the only thing that has changed. There's a black security camera in the corner that was never there before. It's pointing in the direction of my apartment, probably so it can see down the hall.

Oh my god.

A possibility suddenly clicks in my mind—*did someone break into my apartment last night?*

I guess that would explain the new door and the security camera in the hall, but it doesn't seem right the landlord would have handled it all without even telling me.

I pull my phone out to double check that I didn't miss a voicemail or phone call, some kind of message from my landlord.

I didn't, but my battery is really low so I need to figure out what's going on pretty fast.

I adjust Marie's weight in my arms, then scroll to my landlord's name in my contacts. I glance at the battery one more time—it's red, only 7% battery left—so I need to make this quick.

Most of the time when I call Armen about something, I get his voice mail and he gets around to returning my call sometime in the next two to three days. Mercifully, this time he actually answers the phone.

"Hey, Armen. This is Hallie Meadows in 804. I have kind of a weird problem. I just tried to enter my apartment and not only is my key not working, it appears that I have a completely different door than the one I had when I left last night?

"Is this a joke?" he asks impatiently.

My eyes go wide. "A joke? No. No, I'm the one who feels like some kind of joke has been played on me because, in case you missed it the first time, *I cannot get into my apartment.*"

“Your boyfriend told me you were staying at his place last night so he could fix your door.”

“My *boyfriend*?”

“Bald guy, big shoulders. I didn’t get his name.”

My stomach pitches. His description fits Hollis, but that’s crazy... isn’t it? “You let a strange man change the lock on my apartment?”

“I didn’t let a strange man do anything, I let your boyfriend do it. And you should be thanking him—whatever you did to that door would have come out of your security deposit if he hadn’t fixed it for you.”

“Whatever I did—” I cut off the indignant urge to point out that the lock on that door was broken when I moved into the place. He’s been saying he would fix it literally since before I signed my lease, but the more pressing issue is that he let a strange man into my apartment while I wasn’t home! “Armen, I don’t *have* a boyfriend.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah,” I say, flicking a glance at my door. “And honestly, I’m not very happy that you just let some guy who *said* he was my boyfriend change my locks without any proof. Did he buy the new doorknob himself? This man probably has a key to my apartment now.”

“Why would some man who isn’t your boyfriend pay all that money to replace the door *and* the doorframe, plus buy you new locks for your front door? How does that make any sense?”

“There’s a lot going on in my life right now that doesn’t make much sense,” I murmur.

“I don’t have time for this relationship drama of yours,” Armen tells me. “Your boyfriend or not-boyfriend or whatever the hell he is... he left your new keys taped in the front of your mailbox.” Without giving me time to respond, he says, “I gotta go. Bye.”

Huffing with annoyance, I tuck my phone back in my purse and haul Marie downstairs so I can retrieve my door keys. When I come back up, I take a proper look for the first time. My apartment door doesn't match the rest in the building anymore. The new doorknob is matte black. The old one was a cheap, brassy gold, but the color had faded in most spots. There's a new deadbolt installed, too. Since everything else was replaced, a new chain lock was installed as well.

I turn around and quickly survey the area before I put Marie down. Nothing inside looks different, but I know someone connected to Calvin was in here now, and I have a strong suspicion he kept a key for himself.

Before I hadn't wanted to wake him, but now that I'm at home where I should be safe and I know someone has been in my apartment, I want to make sure it *was* the psycho I know. I can't imagine a burglary ring being very profitable if they went around replacing doors on every house they wanted to rob first, but I'd still like to know for sure.

As soon as Marie's food has been dished out and she's eating, I grab my phone out of my purse and shoot off a text to Calvin. "Did you by chance send a man to my apartment to replace the locks on my front door without my permission?"

I don't have to wait long for a response. "Sounds like something I might do." Bubbles appear on the screen, then I get another message. "Did you by chance creep out of my bed like a thief in the night because you didn't want to cook me breakfast?"

My fingers fly across the screen so fast I make a few hasty mistakes, but with the help of autocorrect I finally manage to send back, "I crept out of your house for a myriad of reasons, but reluctance to cook wasn't one of them."

A few seconds later he returns, "Next time I'll hire Chef Ryan to make us breakfast so you can stay."

"You're not a great listener, are you?" I send back. "Not why I left." I push send, then realize he has roped me into the wrong conversation. "Also

not why I am texting you. You cannot have men infiltrate my home in the dead of night when I'm not home. That is not a thing you're allowed to do."

My eyes narrow as I read his response: "It's cute how you think you can tell me what to do."

"Only you're allowed to do that?" I type back.

"Now you're getting it," he answers.

Sighing, I get to the point. "Do you have a key to my apartment now?"

"Well, I couldn't very well wait for you to give me one," he answers, like that's a reasonable thing to say.

My eyes widen. "I would never give you one!"

"Exactly."

I huff with annoyance. "You are an infuriating man."

"You are a beautiful woman," he answers immediately. "What should we do tonight? Dinner? Movie? Museum? I bet you love museums."

"What I love," I type back, "is not being blackmailed into 'dates' by a lunatic."

"Unfortunately, that I cannot help you with." A few seconds later he adds, "Tell you what, I'll make the plans, you just be ready to go at 8 o'clock."

Narrowing my eyes, I type back, "I did not say I would go out with you tonight."

Almost instantly, the infuriating words, "I know. I did," flash across my phone screen. As if that's not obnoxious enough, he adds, "8 o'clock. Don't keep me waiting."

I'll keep you waiting, all right.

"I realize this word doesn't mean much to you, but I'm going to try it out anyway: NO."

“You’re right,” he answers. “It doesn’t mean much to me. I’ll see you at eight.”

The arrogance of this man, honestly. Like I’m going to jump just because he tells me to. I may have agreed to go on one last “date” with him, but I didn’t say I’d do it tonight. It’s too soon. I haven’t even recovered from our last encounter yet.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he sends me another message, thwarting any notion I might have of standing him up again. “And remember, if you think to keep me waiting tonight, I can just let myself in.”

I suck in a breath at the mere thought of him storming uninvited into my home.

Another message appears. “So, by all means, if you’d like help getting dressed...”

My shoulders slump in defeat, but the rest of me isn’t ready to give up yet. I type back a few different responses, each more frustrated than the last, but the one I end up sending is a succinct, “Fine.” I hate seeing the word on the screen. I type one more line that I hate even more, but I remind myself this is the last time.

I only have to make it through one more night with him, then I’m free. Then I’ll never have to see Calvin Cutler ever again.

Chapter Fifteen

Calvin

“You win.”

I smile as I read the message a second time, then I type back, “Good. You know how I like winning.”

I know it’s dickish to rub her defeat in her face. I don’t even mean to be cruel, I just want to see if she’ll keep bantering with me or if she’s truly done. I only let a few seconds pass without a response, then I shoot her one last message to end the conversation myself, just telling her I’ll see her tonight.

I can’t wait.

I don’t tell her that, but I really can’t.

It’s fucking absurd to waste my last promised date with her tonight when I just spent last night with her. Typically, I have better control of my impulses than this, but I can’t stomach the idea of not spending tonight with her.

Then what will you do tomorrow?

Since my date supply is running dangerously low, I have to start setting up plans C through Z. Typically, my battle plans would be laid out long before I would ever need to enact them, but everything about this woman has me going off-plan, to say the very least.

I glance toward my open office door to see if Arson is here yet, then check my watch again because I don’t even see him at reception.

He’s late. He usually is, so I don’t know why I’m surprised. Men in his line of work tend to work on their own time, and they don’t mind letting

people wait for them.

Five more minutes pass before Arson darkens my doorway. Jodi, my assistant, accompanies him down the hall. She looks so uncomfortable in his presence—with her hair pulled back in a tight, neat bun, her pencil skirt free of a single wrinkle, her heels without so much as a scuff. Jodi is the meticulous type of person who would spend all day agonizing over a run in her stocking that she hadn't noticed before she left for work. She'd spend her lunch break running to buy new ones instead of eating, and she still wouldn't feel settled the rest of the day, imagining anyone who smiled at her might have seen her disgraceful error.

Meanwhile, Arson looks like a disgraceful error.

He wears an expensive three piece suit, but it fits him like a cage fits a big, aggressive dog. The materials might match, but there are ill-fitting pieces of him that can't be covered up—the ink crawling down his arm that goes past the snowy white cuff of his dress shirt and covers both hands. The tension that runs through him and permeates the air around him like an inmate walking the halls of a maximum security correctional facility.

He might be dressed like a proper businessman, but he sure doesn't look like one.

Since Jodi is so clearly uneasy with him, Arson moves past her and walks into my office. I nod at Jodi to release her, and with a visible breath of relief, she turns and heads back to her desk.

"I believe you've unnerved my poor assistant," I say good-naturedly as Arson drops onto the chair across from my desk.

"Yeah, well, we all have our talents. Mine happens to be unnerving people." He shifts in the chair, then sits forward like he's watching a fight he has a lot of money on instead of sitting in a corporate office. "Speaking of unsettling things, I can't believe I have to tell you a thing like this, but having me meet you here in public? Not a great idea."

I shrug faintly and sit back in my seat, linking my fingers over my abdomen. "I don't need you to do anything illegal for me. Well, *too* illegal,"

I amend, a bit more honestly.

Arson doesn't mind doing illegal things, so it doesn't seem to bother him. "You know how paranoid Nick is," he says, shaking his head. "He'd just rather we didn't do this somewhere so public in case things go sideways."

"They won't," I assure him.

He doesn't seem to believe me, but he's not too worried about it one way or the other. "He said something about you needed help with some girl. I didn't get into the details. We're talking about an adult at least, right?"

My brow furrows faintly. "Of course she's an adult."

Arson nods. "All right, just making sure. You never fucking know with people these days." He looks up at the ceiling and at the corners of the room. "You got cameras in here?"

"In the common areas outside. Not in my office."

"Good." He seems a little more at ease as he meets my gaze across the desk. "So, what exactly do you need from me?"

"I've started seeing a woman named Hallie Meadows. I'm a little more dedicated to the idea of us spending more time together than she is, so I need to dig up something I can use for leverage in case I need it to keep her around."

"A little light blackmail to keep things interesting, huh? Sounds like a solid relationship."

My lips quirk. "Written in the stars," I agree dryly. "But, I want what I want, so..."

Arson nods. "No problem. I'm here to provide a service, not my business what you do with it. I can dig around, find whatever skeletons she has stuffed in her closets that you could potentially use against her."

"Anything else you notice that I might be able to use, too. To be honest, I'm not sure she has any skeletons."

He regards me knowingly. “Everyone has skeletons.”

“Yes, but not necessarily useful ones. She’s a sweet girl, I don’t think she’ll have done anything truly awful, but I was able to lure her to my place by stealing her cat, so she definitely has some vulnerabilities. I need to know her background, who she’s close to, who I’d have to put pressure on to get her to do what I want if it comes to that.”

Arson shakes his head. “Anyone ever says chivalry’s dead, I’m sending them straight to you, pal.”

I smile faintly. “I want any information you can find, essentially. Because of how we met, she hasn’t been terribly forthcoming about herself and I need to know more.”

I need to know everything.

I want to know every man she has ever loved and why. Every thought that has ever flitted through her mind, every dream I might be able to make come true. I know Arson probably thinks I’m essentially bullying her into a relationship with me—and I will if I have to—but I’d prefer to lure her in more gently. For whatever reason, I genuinely like her, and I want to be good to her if she’ll let me.

I just also want her to be mine at any cost, and I don’t particularly care if she’s not on the same page.

I can get her there. I know I can.

Chapter Sixteen

Hallie

I haven't decided what to wear to this date I don't even want to go on, but there's a knock on the door around 5:30 that eliminates the need to.

I'm not expecting any packages, but when I peek out the peephole to see who it is, I see Hollis with a dress bag and another stack of boxes. This time he has a woman with him, someone with dark curly hair and skin darker than his. She's wearing an orange and brown outfit with stiletto heels and has several bangle bracelets dangling from her slim wrist.

I frown, then unlock the door and ease it open.

"Date preparations," Hollis informs me before I've even asked, barging right in with the woman following behind him.

"Um..."

I follow him through my apartment (which he seems to know his way around pretty well, considering I've never shown him around) and the woman heads for my bathroom where she begins to unpack the bag she brought with her.

When Hollis comes out of my bedroom empty-handed, I ask, "What is going on?"

"Monique is going to help you get ready for your date tonight." He checks in on Monique to make sure she has everything she needs, then he starts to leave. Before he does, he doubles back to tell me, "And, just in case you were considering it, there's no point trying to appeal to her for any sort of help. She knows where you're going tonight, and not only will she not believe you, she'll think you're an absolute moron."

My eyes widen and my jaw goes slack, but Hollis just leaves, telling me he will see me a little later.

Monique seems upbeat as she takes out all her beautifying tools. She starts talking about how excited I must be and how lucky I am. She tells me her last date was eating Ray's Pizza on a park bench, and it gets me thinking about the last date I went on—a real one, not one I was coerced into.

Jackson and his friends were going to see an indie movie some girl he knew had a part in. He invited me to come along, and we stopped for sushi on the way there. I don't like sushi. I'd told him that before, but he must have forgotten.

I wonder what Calvin has planned for our final date.

It feels sordid to call it that, but I guess it's what I agreed to.

Monique styles my hair and does my makeup, then escorts me to my bedroom to unpack my stuff. I try to help, but she tells me to sit down and stop touching things so I don't smudge the manicure she gave me before it has time to dry.

It doesn't feel right sitting here like some kind of princess while someone else does everything for me, but since she clearly doesn't want help, I look at my nails. Monique hasn't let me see my hair or my makeup yet. She said it'll be more fun if I see the whole look she put together once I'm completely ready.

My nails are lovely. She used different blue Dior polishes to make a beautiful, shimmery ombre look from dark at my cuticle beds to such a light blue, the tips are nearly white. I've had a few manicures over the years, but my nails have never looked this lovely.

The first box she opens contains a pair of black suede pumps that tie in a bow at the ankle. They seem a bit high-maintenance and are certainly nothing I would ever buy for myself, but boy, are they beautiful.

The second box contains a shimmery silver clutch with crystal fringe.

The third, a blue strapless bra with matching panties.

Finally, she opens a small jewelry box and shows me the stunning diamond and white gold bracelet inside.

With the boxes all opened, she opens the dress bag to reveal a midnight blue beaded ball gown.

A ball gown?

Where could he possibly be taking me that I need a ball gown?

Monique helps me get into it and once I'm fully dressed, she finally lets me see a mirror.

My own reflection sort of takes my breath away. My hair is done up in a sleek chignon, my makeup would fit in on any Hollywood red carpet, and the gorgeous blue ball gown makes me feel like Cinderella.

Well, if Cinderella had a psycho semi-stalker instead of Prince Charming.

I never expected to feel anything like excitement approaching this date, but when Hollis shows up a moment later, I can't deny a small spark of it as he escorts me out to the limo.

That ember should die the moment he opens the door for me and I see Calvin inside. He looks handsome, but he always does. Tonight he's dressed in a fine black tux with gleaming loafers. He looks like James Bond waiting for me instead of the villain I know he is.

"Should've brought an Aston Martin," I remark as I lift the bottom of my gown and climb into the car.

His lips tug up. "I'll keep the suggestion in mind for next time."

My eyebrows rise and I look over at him. "Next time? There is no next time. I promised you one last 'date' and here I am. Once this one is over, my obligation to you is fulfilled."

I don't bother pointing out that I never really had an obligation to him to begin with, that he forced this whole arrangement and I've been an unwilling participant every step of the way.

He doesn't bother remarking on it any further, either.

Since I'd rather watch the city lights out the window than talk to him, that's what I do. Focusing on the sights instead of thinking about the rest of tonight seems the safest thing for my mental health. There's no point wallowing in the inevitability.

Sure, I could spend the car ride tense and wondering when tonight will actually end. *If* it will end. I told him when this date ended he wouldn't get another, so what if he decides to kidnap me like he said he would before?

Is there even a chance of me returning home to my apartment tonight, untouched by him?

A vision springs to mind of me in this ball gown, trapped in that dungeon with the door that doesn't open.

It occurs to me as we drive along Fifth Avenue that I should probably be watching to make sure he doesn't take me back there. It would be a fitting end, I suppose, but given the things he said about that club, I'm afraid to go back. If I refused to enter, would anyone even believe me, or would they just think it's part of our roleplay for me to be so reluctant?

Something tells me he's crafty enough to convince them it's a roleplay.

It probably wouldn't be hard given I am wearing a *ball gown*.

Crap.

Concern flickers across my brow. Calvin glances over and sees it, but he does nothing to ease my mind.

I don't know where the sex club is. I'm not great at directions. I know we didn't come this way that first night, but I was coming from a club in a different part of town, so that doesn't mean anything.

“Where are we going?” I finally ask, once the dread gets too heavy and I need relief enough to speak to him.

His dark gaze lands on me. He doesn’t answer immediately. He keeps me waiting a moment, then says cryptically, “You’ll see.”

Well, that was no help.

I cross my arms and sit back in the seat, pouting a little. Inexplicably, this seems to please Calvin, and his eyes spark with heat.

My stomach jumps with nerves. Whatever I did to stir his interest I want to undo it, but I’m not sure what it was. I uncross my arms and stop pouting immediately. I start watching out the window like I was before, but I can still feel his gaze on me. I can still feel the heat. Whatever I awakened, there was no undoing it, and for the rest of the car ride I get the feeling it takes every bit of his willpower not to maul me right here in the back of the limo.

He doesn’t, though.

I suppose he wants to save that for *after* whatever date he has planned.

The urge to pout about the unfairness again is strong, but I have a strong feeling he liked that, so I don’t.

It’s not much longer before the car pulls up in front of a place I definitely recognize, but I’m a little confused because it’s definitely closed at this time of night. Unless there’s a private event here tonight...

They do have lavish fundraisers here sometimes and Calvin probably attends things like that. I suppose that would explain the gown and the tux, but would Calvin really take me somewhere so public for our last date?

I guess so, because the car stops and Hollis gets out. As he walks around to open my door, I glance over at Calvin. “This is what you wanted to do tonight?”

Maybe it’s not.

Maybe he already had plans so I’m just tagging along.

Rather than answer explicitly, he asks, “Was I wrong? Do you not like museums?”

“No, I do, I just...”

I thought we would be alone.

I don’t say that because then he might take it to mean I *wanted* to be alone with him, and that would be crazy.

I should be glad he’s taking me somewhere public.

Besides, never in my wildest dreams did I expect to ever attend at fundraiser at The Met.

I should be glad that’s all it is.

Why am I not glad?

I don’t like it, but in a dank, dark corner of my soul I’m confronted by the idea I’d had that Calvin would want me all to himself, especially on our last night together. Or, the last one I’ll agree to be present at, at least.

Even the kidnapping thing seems impossible after this. A lavish event like that would be photographed. There would be evidence that he was out with me tonight, so if I went missing, people would be able to determine pretty easily that he was the last person I was seen with.

It’s absurd to be even slightly disappointed that this is the date. It’s not something I even want to admit to myself, but... that’s how I feel.

Shaking it off and telling myself to be sensible, I gather the bottom of my gown so I can climb out of the car without tripping on it. If anything, my conflicted feelings solidify the fact that I desperately need to never see this man again. He’s scrambling my mind, and the sooner our last night is done, the better.

Calvin offers his arm once we’re both out of the limo. I don’t want to take it so I walk past, pretending not to notice he did. I don’t have to pretend to be distracted by the grandeur of The Metropolitan Museum of

Art. Lifting my skirt, I begin to ascend the steps alone, but my heart sinks when I'm yanked backward and fear grabs hold of me.

My heart expects to plummet backward down the steps, but instead a strong arm settles around my waist. Calvin yanks me into his side a bit forcefully, then slides me a sideways look of censure.

"In case you were wondering, it wasn't a mere *suggestion* when I offered you my arm."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. The tone of his voice and the stiffness of his posture lets me know I've insulted him and floods me with an insane need to apologize. I could lie and pretend I didn't see the arm he offered, but I know that would only further irritate him.

I shouldn't care if I irritate him, but a pit opens up in my stomach and seems to insist that I do.

Damn my good manners.

Swallowing past a lump in my throat, I glance over at him, but I can't bring myself to apologize. I feel like I should, but I also feel like that would be crazy. I'm at odds with myself, so I don't say a word.

Chapter Seventeen

Hallie

When we enter the great hall, there's not another soul around.

I didn't expect the event to be here in the great hall, but I look around for a sign or banner announcing the benefit and letting guests know where it's located. I don't see one, but I suppose an event like this is invitation-only, so maybe they have no need of a sign.

Calvin releases me so I can turn around, tilting my head back and looking up at the incredible architecture all around me. The beautiful archways, the high ceilings. I've never seen the place so empty before, but I have to admit, it's pretty cool.

"I feel like we have the whole place to ourselves," I murmur with a smile I can't hold back. It's not for him, it's for The Met.

I feel his eyes on me as I wander over to look at an enormous mural painted on the wall. He startles me when he says simply, "We do."

I spin around and my gaze darts back to him. "What?"

He gestures around the empty museum. "Do you see anyone else?"

"Well... no. But..." I look around again, as if someone might pop up.

No one does.

Frowning, I look back at Calvin. "I'm confused."

Calvin takes a step forward, then another. He's not coming toward me, but walking through the great hall. He seems to be heading somewhere, so I have to follow him to get my answer.

“The place is ours for the evening,” he states. “It’s a bit late to see everything, but I thought we’d take a stroll through the Egyptian art on our way to the main event.”

My heels click against the floor as I follow him. “Ours? You mean *just* ours?”

He nods once, then glances back at me. “There will be a guard on duty once we get into the gallery, but he’ll stay out of the way. Essentially, it’s just us.”

“You... rented out... The Met,” I say slowly, trying to wrap my head around what he’s saying. “Just for this. Just... for a date.”

“Correct.”

I blink and say nothing for a moment. He says it like it’s no big deal, but this is a *very* big deal.

I stop walking. Since my heels stop clicking, they give me away. Calvin stops and turns back to look at me, hiking an eyebrow in question.

It’s a rude question, I don’t even mean to ask it, but the words tumble out before I can stop them. “How rich *are* you?”

His lips quirk. “Rich enough.”

Then he gestures for me to come with him.

I want to know what it’s like to have a whole world-class museum to myself, so I do.

Moments later we’re approaching the tomb of Perneb and the beginning of the Egyptian art exhibit. I’ve been to the tomb before, but I didn’t stay long. The doorways are narrow and there are always a bunch of people to squeeze past. It made me feel claustrophobic, so I left before I even made it through the whole thing.

Tonight it’s just us, but Calvin takes up more space than he has a right to.

He takes the lead, too. As if we're exploring some unknown, potentially dangerous area, he keeps me behind him as we walk through the tight spaces.

"Making sure the coast is clear?" I joke.

He glances back at me, his dark hair and dark clothes a striking contrast from the sand-colored walls and brighter images painted on the stone surface. "What? You don't trust me to keep you safe?"

I roll my eyes. He's the last person in the world I should trust to keep me safe, but the intimacy of the moment, the two of us alone in this ancient structure... something about it strikes a chord. Reminds me of that odd sensation I get sometimes that he would protect me from danger, he just can't be bothered to stop damaging me himself.

"The chapel," he says, looking around as we enter the room.

"Are you allowed in those?" I murmur, looking around instead of at him, but I can still see out of the corner of my eyes when his lips tug up with amusement.

"If the structure collapses, I guess we'll have our answer," he says lightly.

I move forward, gazing at the Egyptians painted all around. I reach out a hand to follow the pictures, to look at the record of all the offerings that were brought here for Perneb's spirit.

"When I was a little girl, I found Egyptology very interesting," I tell him. I don't know why I tell him, but once I do, I keep going. "I had a vivid dream once that I was a boy living in an ancient Egyptian city and helping build the pyramids. After that, I always felt connected to that part of history. In my 7th grade history class we had this project, we had to remake a relic from one of the ancient civilizations. I chose Egypt and made a replica sculpture with hieroglyphs that was so detailed and accurate, the principal asked if they could display it in a trophy cabinet in the library. I think it's still on display there today."

“You must be very artistic,” he remarks.

“I better be,” I say lightly, forgetting I never told him what my job is. There’s little point holding back now, so I explain, “I illustrate children’s books for a living.”

“Ah.” He nods, meeting my gaze as we move through the tomb. “An artist.” When I nod, he asks, “Is that what you wanted to do?”

“More or less. I love helping other people bring their stories to life for children to enjoy, but someday it would be nice to illustrate for myself. Maybe write my own books. I don’t know, I’m always working on project after project, so there’s never really time.” Somewhat uncomfortable sharing this ambition I’ve never shared with anyone before, I try to change the subject. “What were you like as a child?”

“Odd,” he says dryly.

I bite back a smile as I take the lead around the next corner. “You? Odd? I can’t imagine.”

“I wasn’t all that creative, but I was observant. Curious. I was always watching the world around me, trying to make sense of it. I didn’t really fit in with other kids. I had plenty of surface-level friends, but I think they made me feel lonelier than I probably would have without any.”

Hearing that drains the trace of amusement I felt when I asked. “Oh. Loneliness is no fun. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not,” he says, his tone cavalier as he catches me around the waist and presses me against the wall.

I brace my hands on the hard surface, sucking in a breath as my heart rate accelerates. He only holds me for a moment, though. Just long enough to get past me so he’s in the lead.

“Made me who I am today,” he finishes, a hint of pleasure in his tone because he startled me.

I swallow and dust off the front of my dress even though I'm sure it's fine. "You shouldn't press people against walls in ancient tombs."

"I saw you wanting to touch it a minute ago, but you stopped yourself. Now you've touched it," he says, flashing me a devilish smirk over his shoulder.

He's right, but I shake my head at him. "You just wanted to be in front."

He doesn't bother arguing.

We finish exploring the tomb, then make our way through the Egyptian art displays. The guard he mentioned comes into view as we check out buttons and tiles unearthed by archeologists.

"Are they afraid we'll steal them?" I whisper as I gaze at a small blue bead with a slightly warped face that seems surprised or afraid.

"Perhaps. Maybe the whole date's a ruse and I'm an art thief," he teases. "Impressing you is just my cover story."

My cheeks warm and I find myself smiling even though I shouldn't. "I can definitely see you being a secret art thief, but for what this night must have cost, you better steal something more valuable than an old bead."

"Oh, I intend to," he murmurs as he passes behind me to look at the next display.

I try not to think about that too hard as we continue on, exploring reliefs and sculptures, ceiling paintings and pieces of tombs—priceless works of art and pieces of history.

Out of all the parts of the museum he could've taken me through tonight, it's funny that he picked the part I've always enjoyed the most. I know it's a coincidence—there's no way he could have known I ever had an interest in Egyptian art—but it's crazy how perfect his choice was.

"Which piece did you like most?" Calvin asks me as we walk out of the last exhibit.

“It’s a bit pedestrian,” I warn him, “but I think William the hippo is my favorite. The first time I saw that little blue hippo I loved him, and I still do. If I were an art thief, I would steal William.”

“Pretty famous piece,” he tells me. “Might be hard to fence.”

“I wouldn’t sell it,” I say, my eyes widening. “I’d keep him for myself. Put him on my dresser or something so I can see him every day.”

Calvin shakes his head at me. “Of course you would.”

“I don’t think I could ever be an art thief, though. These pieces are meant to be seen and enjoyed by many, not stashed on a shelf in some rich person’s house.”

“An art lover who doesn’t aspire to own any actual art?” he asks cocking an eyebrow.

“I can own all the art I want, but I’m fine with copies. I don’t need to own the originals.”

Shaking his head, Calvin remarks, “We are very different people.”

Finally, after exploring all the rest, we get to the *piece de resistance*—the Temple of Dendur. An actual Egyptian temple brought to the states piece by piece and reconstructed in this room built just to display it. The room is massive with a whole wall of windows so people in Central Park can see the temple without even coming in.

It doesn’t look the way it does during the day when museum-goers come to see it, though. The room is dimly lit since it’s evening, and uplighting casts a golden glow on the ancient structure

As we walk around the serenity pool and nearer to the temple, I see another man waiting for us by the stairs. Not the security guard, but a man in black slacks and a white dress shirt. He almost looks like a waiter.

When he sees us coming, he walks over to a table set up in front of the temple. It’s a table for two with candlelight and rose petals spread out across the gold table cloth. There are two crystal goblets of water and two

empty goblets which the waiter fills with wine as we approach. There are two place settings. Folded linen napkins sit atop gold chargers with gold eating utensils on either side.

I had heard this room was rented out for weddings or benefits, but I've never heard of it being rented out for a dinner just for two people.

Even though ours is the only table, it was clearly set up by an event planner. The whole space was. It has the look of a wedding reception or black tie gala, only it's just for us.

"This is... wow," I say, gazing up at the impressive temple as Calvin moves up behind me and pulls out my chair. I look at him. "Wow," I say again.

Pleasure glitters in his dark eyes. "I'm glad you like it."

"Of course I do—who wouldn't? This is an insane amount of effort to put into a date, though. How did you even do all this in one day?"

"That part was a bit tricky, but I called in some favors. I figured if I'm going to convince you to go out with me again, I'd better go big or go home."

Shaking my head as I take the napkin off the charger and unfold it across my lap, I say, "Well, I hope that's not why you went to all this trouble. It is very nice and I'm *very* impressed, but this doesn't change anything between us."

When I look at him across the table, I expect him to look thunderstruck. He's thrown all this money in front of me and arranged a lavish date that exceeds even my wildest dreams—he must have expected the show of wealth and effort would change my mind. Honestly, I can even understand why he would. He thinks he can buy anything, even me, and it must be a shock to find out he's wrong.

But he doesn't look surprised or disappointed at all. It's almost as if that's the response he expected, which begs the question: what sane person would put in this level of effort not even expecting it to change anything?

“You don’t seem disheartened,” I remark tentatively.

He shakes his head. “I’m not. That’s about how I expected you to feel.”

Frowning faintly, I ask, “Why did you do all of this, then?”

His gaze meets mine across the table, and without a flicker of hesitation or disingenuousness, he says, “Because I thought you deserved it.”

His words hollow out a space in my stomach that I don’t entirely understand.

I’ve never in my life been out with a man like him before. I mean in the bad ways, sure, but the good ones, too. I’ve been out with my share of selfish assholes who take what they want without concern for other people, but I’ve never gone out with a man who would go to all this trouble knowing I’d just reject him in the end, anyway.

Granted, perhaps that stings less for Calvin because he knows he’ll take what he wants regardless of my decision, but he doesn’t have to put in all that effort first. I knew showing up was non-negotiable. He could have had Hollis pick me up and bring me right to his place. Hell, he could’ve mauled me without even giving me dinner and then sent me on my way.

Instead, he rented out The Met because he thought I deserved it.

It’s hard to reconcile both sides of him sometimes. How he could be so heartless and hurt me the way he has, but then do something as thoughtful and considerate as this when he certainly didn’t have to.

If I didn’t know better, it might be easy to get confused.

But I know better.

Right?

Yes. Yes, of course I do...

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Chapter Eighteen

Hallie

The waiter brings over our first course. It's a plate of cured meats with grapes, olives, and cheeses. He also gives us a basket of bread for the table with some seasoned oil.

The next course is a single meatball slider with some kind of shaved cucumber slaw on the side.

An incredible cut of steak is brought out next. It's so good, each bite makes my mouth water and my eyes roll back in my head. All I want to talk about is how good it is, but I don't want Calvin to feel too proud of himself, so I hold my tongue.

A small plate of delicious pasta is brought out, and then—finally—dessert.

“An actual dessert tonight,” I remark as the waiter puts down a small dish that looks like ice cream, but I guess is probably gelato. There's a dollop of cream on top dusted with spice. I don't know what it is, exactly, but I grab my spoon and have a taste.

My taste buds are overwhelmed at first bite. Between the spice and the creaminess—and there's a slice of something cake-like that I didn't notice looking at it, it blended in with the spice dusting.

Oh my god.

As soon as I've swallowed my bite, I ask, “What is this?”

Calvin's lips quirk. “Heaven.”

He's not kidding. I take another small bite and look across the table at him as I prepare to swallow. “You've shown me heaven and hell. What a

well-rounded tour guide you are.”

His smile widens. “Stick with me, baby. You’ll get the full experience.”

Heat hits my cheeks when he calls me baby, even though he was just joking.

This night is... unbelievable. The food, the atmosphere...

The company.

I try to ignore that little whisper in the back of my mind. I know I shouldn’t enjoy spending time with him. It’s insane after what he’s done, no matter how many museums he rents out.

I grab my wine glass and take a sip, watching him over the rim. The waiter hasn’t let my glass go empty since we sat down, so I’m starting to feel it.

Maybe it’s not just the alcohol.

No.

Shaking off the errant thought, I swallow the wine and put the goblet down so I can get back to my incredible dessert.

Even though it’s insane to be able to ignore such a decadent dessert, Calvin doesn’t seem as interested in it as I am. He leaves it untouched on the table, his attention focused on me instead.

“I’d like to take you out again next weekend,” he states. “We can have dinner, see a show. You like Broadway?”

My lips curve up slightly. I don’t look at him. “Yes, I do, but I’m not going on another date with you. We’ve already discussed this.”

“We have, but remember what I said the first time we spoke about me not accepting answers I don’t like?”

“I do,” I answer. “I also remember me agreeing to just one more date. They were even your terms.”

“Just because that contract is up doesn’t mean we can’t negotiate a new one,” he states, like this is a business deal instead of... whatever it is.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not interested in the position,” I say lightly.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not interested in anyone else,” he states immovably.

I scoop up another bite of delicious dessert and bring it to my mouth. As I chew, I meet his gaze across the table. I can see it in his eyes, an unwillingness to relent. It’s not even a possibility in his mind that this will be our last night together.

I don’t want to challenge him. I can sense that’s the wrong move. But I can’t spend any more time with him, either. It would be crazy.

Rather than rebuff him outright, I try a different tack. “I don’t understand why you’re even so interested in me, to be honest. Surely you have your pick of just about any other woman you want. You have plenty to offer.”

His lips tug up, but with hardly any amusement. “I know what I have to offer. I also know what I want, and right now, it’s you. It’s not like you have to agree to marry me, just a few more dates. Save yourself the trouble and say yes now, before I have to put in more effort.”

I shake my head. “I appreciate you arranging this date tonight and I won’t forget it. I won’t forget you, obviously,” I murmur, though less to appease him this time and more because I realize the permanence he will have in my memory. Some memories fade, but others have staying power. You can forget the man you had a bad date with, or even the man you had a great date with, but the man who does the things to you that this one has done to me...

He’ll be sticking with me, all right.

Bastard.

I don't use that word since I remember how he responded last time I did, but that thought flickering through my mind dulls some of my appreciation for this extravagant evening he organized and makes it easier to finish succinctly. "But after tonight, we're finished—just like we agreed. No negotiation, no extension. Just finished. That's it. The end."

"You don't really believe that, do you, Hallie?"

"I do," I say a touch stubbornly.

Pulling a disappointed face, he says, "Pity. I thought you were more intelligent than that."

My eyes narrow at the insult. "I'm not sure what's *more* intelligent than avoiding spending time alone with a rapist, actually."

His eyebrows rise at my use of that word, but he doesn't dispute it.

Instead, he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest, making himself comfortable. "Let me explain something to you, sweetheart."

Oh boy, here we go.

"I'm rich."

I thought he might come out with some new threat, but I can scarcely keep the disdain off my face when *that's* his argument for letting him have his way. "Congratulations."

"No, that wasn't the end of the story. I was also born very comfortable—not rich, exactly, but I wanted for no material things growing up. We had a nice house in a nice neighborhood, I got a brand-new car the day I turned 16. I went to private school and when I graduated, I had a bloated college fund waiting to pay my way through the best school I could get into."

"It sounds like you've had a dreadfully hard life," I say flatly. "I can see why you turned out the way you did."

He shakes his head. "Still not finished. Now, my mom did society wife things—social engagements and fundraising benefits—but she didn't have a

dime of her own money. When she took my dad home to her parents and told them she was marrying him, they forbade her right there in front of him. They told her if she left with him that night, she was no longer their daughter. She did, and they disowned her. She hasn't seen them since."

My eyes widen. "Wow. That seems... harsh."

"It was, but they knew what she didn't—my dad was a fucking prick and he would treat her like shit for the rest of her life. I assume they either couldn't watch it, or they wrongfully imagined if they literally stopped speaking to her, she would come to her senses and not marry him. That didn't happen. My mom is a sweet, gentle woman and she was only 20-years-old. My father started controlling her the moment they met and never stopped. She didn't know any other way."

"That's... terrible," I murmur.

He nods casually. "If you asked my mother, she'd say he loves her. She lives in denial—not willfully, it's just the way he has conditioned her all these years. He's more intelligent than she is and she trusts him, so it's not that difficult for him to trick her into believing things. If you asked him, he would insist he loves her, too. See, there's a reason he's such an asshole. When he was a kid, his mother was a difficult, often cruel woman. It seems she was senselessly capricious. Maybe it was mental illness, maybe she was just mean, no one I've spoken to knows, but what *is* known is how cruel she was to him. There was no physical abuse, but she picked on him so mercilessly that he would stutter anytime she was in the room. It was only when she was around. After he moved out, he never stuttered again until he saw her at his wedding."

He doesn't seem terribly fond of his father, but I can't help feeling sympathetic toward the little boy who must have felt so unloved by his mother. Before I can think what to say, he goes on.

"As a result of living with his mother, my father learned to hate women. He doesn't *know* he hates women. If you asked him, I'm certain he would insist he doesn't, but he does. He *loathes* them, wants to punish them and make them suffer just for being what he hates. He 'loves' my mother

for being low-maintenance and gullible. He can do horrible things to vent this hatred he won't acknowledge, cheat on her with her own friends—and he gets away with it. There's no price to pay for his behavior. She's not angry or even hurt because she wholeheartedly believes him when he tells her that they're just being jealous bitches if they say something to cause trouble, trying to get between them because they'd like him to be available so they could pounce on him themselves. And for all that my father claims to love my mother, for all the years they've spent together, if she ever stopped being his doormat and stood up for herself, he would abandon her in a hot fucking second and have her replaced within days. Women are completely disposable, replaceable *things* to him, even ones he claims to love."

I feel my face twisted in lines of disgust. I felt sympathy for the damaged boy his father was, but it sounds like he grew up to be a rather repugnant man.

Giving up his relaxed position, Calvin leans forward and meets my gaze. "I despise my father the same way he despised his mother. He has spent a lifetime mistreating the kindest woman he ever met, and she has always deserved better. She'll never get it, though. Not while he's alive. Even once he's dead, she won't know how to let someone actually love her because she's used to him. She's his prisoner—has been for most of her adult life, and she doesn't even know it." Irritation flickers in his gaze. He grabs his wine glass and takes a sip. By the time he puts it back down, he is composed again. "So, when I turned 18 and had the easy path already paved and waiting for me to coast down it, do you know what I did?"

I shake my head no.

"I rejected it. Didn't take the money for college because fuck my father. Took a sales job, got a roommate, paid my own way through school. At the end of the day, I didn't want my father to be able to take any credit for where I ended up. I should also mention I'm their only child." He points at me. "That's relevant."

"Got it."

“My father, he was a scientist—is a scientist,” he amends. “He’s still alive, just not to me. Anyway, he started a tech company a long time ago, got in on the ground floor. The company became enormously successful. He expected me to take it over once I finished college and spent enough time working there and learning the ropes. Legacy is important to him, and he wanted to build something for his only son.”

I have an idea where this might be going.

“I *am* the CEO of a massively profitable tech company, Hallie, but do you think it’s the one my father built for me?”

Pressing my lips together in a grim line, I shake my head.

“No,” he agrees. “It’s not. Because what I wanted more than wealth was to wound my father, so I put myself through school and then went to work for his biggest competitor. Once I learned the ropes there, I got promoted, and I kept getting promoted until I was right there at the top. When the CEO decided to retire, trade in the long nights for a board seat, I’m the one he chose to take over the running of his company. It’s my company now, and I crushed my father’s years ago.” Sitting back in his seat, he gazes at me, “So you see, Hallie, I’m not afraid to put in a fuck ton of effort to get what I want, even if there’s a much easier option available. We only get one life, and I’m going to spend mine having *exactly* what I desire.”

Our gazes are locked, mine guarded like an animal in the presence of a predator, his calm because in his mind this is just a dance. Losing is an impossibility to him, and I guess I can see why. With enough money and power, there’s not much you can’t make happen, and he is clearly strong-willed if he’s not even tempted by what’s easy and chases what he wants with such single-minded determination. This is not a man easily deterred once he sets his mind to something, and if his sights are set on me... I’m not sure how I can change that.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask softly, knowing there’s a good chance I’ll piss him off if I do.

“Of course.”

I lick my dry lips, then take a drink of the wine that remains in my glass. That's not what I needed, so I quickly take a sip of water, then bring my focus back to Calvin, patiently awaiting my question. "You seem angry at your father for... stealing your mother's life, essentially. For imprisoning her—that's the word you used."

He nods, following me so far.

My heart beats a little faster. I know I'm walking a potentially dangerous line. "But aren't you willing to do the same thing to me?" His whole face freezes. His eyes widen slightly as if he can't quite believe my gall, then go cold in a way that sends a chill straight down my spine. Scrambling for purchase on this increasingly slippery slope, I stammer, "I—I mean, you said that you would kidnap me and lock me up in your bedroom until you're finished with me. You said you'd destroy me if I didn't give you what you wanted—"

His chair scrapes the floor as he stands and shoves it back.

I suck in a breath and push back in mine, instinctively trying to put distance between us when I don't have time to stand and run.

Calvin stops and glowers down at me. A glower should be hot, but his is ice cold.

I try to look away from him.

I gasp as he roughly grabs my jaw and forces me to look up at him.

I've never felt so breakable in all my life. I can feel fear glistening in my eyes as I look up into his cold ones.

"Never compare me to my father, Hallie."

I want to pry his steel grip off my face, but I don't want to fight him. I don't want to engage in a battle I know I'll lose.

Instead, I swallow down my just defense and nod my head ever so slightly.

At my submission, his grip eases but doesn't leave my face. The brute forcefulness melts away to leave room for something closer to tenderness. He cups my jaw in his hand, then strokes my skin with his fingers. A reward, perhaps. A bit of gentleness and wordless praise for being such a good girl after I flirted with being such a bad one.

Some kind of sickness must be rooted deep inside me because it feels like heaven, especially moments after he felt so cold and angry. The warmth of his approval washes over me and spreads through me. I close my eyes and, for just a second, let myself lean into his strong touch.

He only lets me have my reward for a second, then he withdraws his hand and leaves me feeling a bit bereft.

He doesn't leave me that way for long, though.

He offers his hand. "We're finished with dessert."

I'm not. I still have a bit left, and it's so good I hate to leave it unfinished, but he knows that. He wants to see if I'll argue.

I take his hand, but regard him uncertainly as I push up from my seat and stand in front of him.

"Are we leaving?" I ask.

He shakes his head, then glances at the illuminated temple. "Might as well explore the inside while we have it to ourselves."

I can't argue with that. Like the tomb we walked through on the way here, I've only seen the temple with a group of strangers crowded around me. It will be nice to be the only two, so I won't feel rushed. If I want to spend a few extra minutes looking, I won't feel the guilt of making other people wait, or being in anybody's way.

Calvin is the only person I can get in the way of, and something tells me he is less interested in the actual temple than I am.

Something else whispers that perhaps I should be wary of his interest to get me alone, but that's ridiculous. We aren't in the dungeon of some

New York sex club. We're at the Temple of Dendur in The Metropolitan Museum of Art for God's sake. It's not like he can pounce on me here.

Meeting his gaze, I could swear he can read my thoughts and his dark eyes gleam with the promise of trouble.

Are you sure about that?

But of course I'm sure.

He may be an absolute rogue, but he must know there are *some* rules that simply can't be broken.

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Chapter Nineteen

Hallie

The temple isn't enormous, but it *is* impressive. It was built thousands of years ago on the banks of the Nile River in Egypt and now it's here, in this beautiful, custom built exhibit in New York City.

And for tonight, it's all ours.

Calvin's hand startles me when it touches the small of my back, but I've stopped in front of the temple and he's only urging me forward.

I move past the columns that resemble stalks of papyrus and enter the porch of the temple. It's within walls, but not closed in like the next room, so I don't entirely feel like I'm alone with him. Still, I feel the room shrink as he walks up behind me, then moves forward and examines the wall beside me.

Unease crawls up my spine, raising the hairs on the back of my neck, but I glance outside the temple at the table set up in front of the outer building, at the server clearing our dishes and the guard standing nearby.

We're not alone.

I tell myself that, but it doesn't make me relax. He's standing too close.

Carvings cover the interior wall. Calvin runs his hand right over one, causing me to suck in a scandalized gasp and glance outside again. The guard is still out there, but he isn't watching us at all.

"You're not supposed to do that," I tell him.

Side-eyeing me, his lips tug up in faint amusement. "And I would never do anything I'm not allowed to do," he says, his voice gently mocking.

I roll my eyes. “That’s not—This is different. This is a priceless piece of history on display at a *museum*. The structure has been through enough, it doesn’t need your skin oils degrading it even more. Not to mention, this was a *church*. It wouldn’t kill you to be a little respectful—”

I stop when he slowly raises his palm, then places it against the Egyptian carving on the wall just to get a rise out of me.

I narrow my eyes at him, but decide not to reward him with further attention. I shift my focus back to the wall and all the carvings, trying to focus on the artwork and not the needlessly challenging man beside me.

I feel easier when he lowers his hand and starts gazing without touching, but I try not to let him realize that.

“Temples in Ancient Egypt weren’t like our modern day churches,” he finally says without looking away from the wall. “They weren’t places of communal worship. They weren’t for the people at all. They were houses for the gods. The priests were here to care for them, not to offer spiritual guidance to the public.”

I glance over at him, but he doesn’t wait for me to speak before going on.

“Only the priests and the pharaoh were allowed to worship here, and only after undergoing rigorous purification rituals. They had to shave their whole bodies bare.”

As he says that last part, his gaze rakes over me as if my dress just turned transparent and he can see all the places *I’m* bare. Heat creeps up my neck and spreads to my cheeks. I look away from him and resist the impulse to cover myself. There’s nothing here to cover up with anyway, but logically I know he can’t *really* see beneath the fabric of my gown.

Touching the wall again briefly, then moving past me and moving nearer to the next wall, he goes on. “This one was a cult temple mainly dedicated to the goddess Isis of Philae. She married her brother and they had a son named Horus.”

My eyebrows rise as I look over the images on this wall, then shift my focus to the ones on the ceiling. “Sexy.”

Calvin smirks at my dry tone. “Isn’t it?”

“The Lannisters seem to like it.”

Stepping away from his history lesson, he asks, “Are you a fan?”

I stop tilting my head back to look at the ceiling and glance at him. “Of Cersei Lannister? No, definitely not.”

His lips curve up. “I meant the show, but obviously you’ve at least dabbled.”

“Watched the whole damned thing—finale episodes twice to prepare for each new season.”

He nods. “Didn’t find her interesting, huh?”

“Interesting maybe, but too evil for my tastes. Plus she created Joffrey, and some things just can’t be forgiven.”

He smirks. “A valid point.”

“Really?” I ask with feigned surprise. “A spoiled ass with a penchant for callously disregarding the dignity of others—I’d think he’s your favorite.”

“Ouch. Having a low opinion of me is one thing, but comparing me to Joffrey Baratheon is a bit much.”

I glance back at him as he gets a little too close. “I don’t think so. He believes everyone is his to torment. Judging by our interactions, I’d say you share his flawed—” The breath is sucked out of my lungs, the rhythm from my heart, as he grabs my waist and pulls me back against him.

The thread of conversation slipped from my fingers the moment he touched me, so I’m surprised when he leans in and murmurs intimately, “Ah, that’s where you’ve misunderstood me. I don’t believe *everyone* is mine to torment. Only you.”

I can scarcely draw a breath, but I don't want him to know how much he has thrown me. "Oh, so I'm special. Am I supposed to feel flattered?"

His lips touch the side of my neck just below my ear. The kiss sends a shiver down my spine and I try to break free from his grasp.

He's not holding tight, so I'm able to escape, but the whole temple feels suddenly smaller. The room we're in claustrophobic even with the doorways open.

I walk to the other side of the porch to check out the engravings, but now that he's touched me, I'm anxious to leave. Now I'm thinking about the car ride home, whether he'll even *take* me to my home or if we'll go straight to his. I don't want to go to his penthouse. I don't want to be forced to spend another night with him. I only promised one more date, not necessarily anything else, but I know the chances of going home untouched are miniscule.

I feel trapped by more than just the temple walls, but I think it's the sandstone structure making me feel so claustrophobic.

"I'm finished," I tell him, hoping he won't want to stay longer.

Calvin lifts his dark eyebrows. "We haven't even stepped inside the first room yet."

"I don't think we're supposed to." Last time I was here we waited in line to check out the porch room and we could look into the interior temple rooms, but no one was actually allowed inside.

Calvin walks under the lovingly engraved doorway, lifts his pointer finger to his lips as if to say, "Shh," then steps into the next room.

My eyes widen and my heart plummets. I glance back at the guard outside, but he still isn't really watching us. Perhaps he thinks anyone willing to shell out however much money to rent this temple for a private dinner will be more respectful of the place than a slew of tourists would be, but he clearly doesn't know Calvin Cutler.

“Calvin,” I whisper furiously, ducking my head into the next room, but not crossing the threshold. “You can’t be in here. It’s not allowed.”

Since no one is meant to enter, the interior rooms aren’t as well-lit as the porch was. Light from the porch streams in, but the first room is dimmer, the second room darker than that one.

Crossing the threshold into that next room isn’t something I’m at all comfortable with, but I’m worried the guard will come over to check if he glances over and realizes he no longer sees us on the porch. I shouldn’t care at all if Calvin gets in trouble for his wrongdoing, but my rule-following instincts compel to make sure everyone in my party is doing what they’re supposed to, and tonight, that’s Calvin.

I know it isn’t, but when the toe of my heel gingerly touches the floor in the next room, it seems so loud and distinct, I’m certain the guards will come running. They’ll know immediately I’ve crossed the line and entered the rooms we’re not allowed in.

Tension gathers in my shoulders as I straddle the threshold, one foot where it’s supposed to be, one where it isn’t allowed, and lean in to try and get Calvin’s attention without attracting any from the guard.

“Please come out of this room before you give me an anxiety attack.”

Calvin seems amused, walking deeper into the room and glancing at the mostly empty walls. Only the borders around the doorways of the interior rooms have carvings. The porch where we’re allowed to explore is the most decorated part of the temple.

“Aren’t you the least bit curious?” he coaxes, meeting my gaze as he unashamedly walks around this ancient room.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Yes. But, unlike you, I’m able to control my impulses.”

“I’m *able* to,” he says. “Sometimes I just choose not to.”

Before I can beg him again to get out of the forbidden temple, he moves into the next room.

“Calvin,” I whisper furiously, darting a glance behind me one last time before fully stepping into the interior room.

My stomach pitches being somewhere I know I’m not supposed to be. I certainly won’t stay long, but I might as well look around while I’m here. In the center of the room there’s a statue atop a column surrounded by a protective shield. I’ve seen it from a distance, but never up close.

“Lovely, isn’t it?”

Calvin’s voice from the doorway just behind the statue startles me and draws my attention back to him. “We have to go,” I tell him softly.

“Don’t you want to see the last room?” he asks, trying to tempt me.

It won’t work. “No. I want to leave before we get arrested or your membership gets revoked or whatever happens to jerks who can’t be bothered to follow the rules.”

Calvin’s lips tug up in a smug little smirk. “You know what happens? They get experiences the rule-followers don’t.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, your careless disregard for others and selfish entitlement are so unique and admirable. You’re so special to possess such qualities. Rules exist for a reason, you know. This temple is ancient and it has already been damaged by the world. It’s supposed to be protected here. *It has* to be so that it can be preserved for generations to come.” Shaking my head, I say, “This is exactly why I don’t date rich men. You think it’s your right to take up so much more space than the average person. You need therapy. I’m going back to the table. If you want to break all the rules, you can do it by yourself.”

I turn to head back through the doorway to the porch, but before I get there, I’m stopped short by Calvin’s steely grip.

With one hand he grabs my upper arm, the other my hip. After halting my movement, he pushes me forward until my breasts are smashed against the temple wall. The sound of my beaded bodice scraping the sandstone surface makes me panic more than his hands on me. Terrified my dress will leave a mark, I try to shove myself away from it, but I only pull back a

couple of inches before my backside is met with the heat of Calvin's muscular body.

"Are you crazy?" I whisper furiously.

His taunt is light and sinfully rich at the same time as he murmurs in my ear, "Am I taking up enough space for you, sweetheart?"

Heat floods my cheeks and I try again to rear back, but I only manage to wind up firmly in his forceful embrace.

"Get off me," I demand, turning my head so I can steal a look back at him.

Unbothered by my tone, he kisses the shell of my ear. "Say please."

Shame turns the tops of my ears red, but I'm too concerned with being caught to waste time arguing with the big jerk. "Please," I manage through gritted teeth.

"Not sweet enough," he reprimands. As if he has all the time in the world and *he's* the god this temple was built for, he says, "Unless you want to end up on your knees right here, right now, I'd try one more time."

Terror sluices through me, widening my eyes and cooling my righteous anger just a bit. "Please," I say, my tone much gentler. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"Mm," he murmurs, his tone thick with approval as he kisses the side of my head. "No, of course you don't. I bet since you don't want to get caught so badly, I could do anything I want to you right now without worrying you might cry out for help..."

A chill slithers down my spine.

He wouldn't.

... Right?

That's what I'm telling myself, but then his massive hand slides down and cups the curve of my ass and I realize...

Yes.

Yes, he would.

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Chapter Twenty

Hallie

I have to get him out of the temple.

Force clearly isn't going to get me anywhere with him. My heart thuds at the thought of what I'm about to say, but I have to be realistic. I know Calvin will fuck me tonight whether I want him to or not, but I might be able to control the location.

"Why don't we go? Dinner's over and you're clearly eager to get on to... the next part of our evening."

Calvin grabs the base of my neatly styled chignon and tugs my head back. "Stop."

My tummy twists. "Stop what?"

"Trying to control the situation. I am not Jackson. I'm not any of the idiot boys you've entertained before me." He gives my hair a firmer tug. "I am in control of this entire night. I am in control of what happens to you and where." He tugs my hair harder, forcing my body back against him. As I arch to accommodate his shoulder, he says in a steely tone, "If you want something, you ask me for it, and you ask *sweetly*. You do not lie, you do not manipulate, you do not control. All of those things are off the table the moment I put my hands on you. Is that clear?"

I swallow and nod tersely.

"Good," he says warmly, a reward for my acquiescence. He releases my hip, and a moment later I feel the back of his hand brushing the exposed curve of my upper back. "Now, if you fight too hard, I might fall back a step and bump into that priceless statue you were admiring. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Goosebumps erupt across my skin as his fingers glide over the sensitive nape of my neck. When a few seconds pass and I still don't answer him, his grip on my hair tightens.

"I said, *would you?*"

"No," I whisper quickly, handcuffed by a helplessness that isn't fair at all.

On one hand, I don't believe he would really destroy a priceless artifact to punish me for not behaving appropriately.

On the other hand, I can't be sure. He *is* a lunatic, after all.

He pushes me forward again. This time, I think fast and shove my left hand between my breasts and the wall. I figure it can act as a buffer so my beaded bodice isn't scraping the ancient sandstone. Given the choice between natural hand oils and scratches from little blue beads, I have to imagine my hand will inflict less damage.

And then there's the man behind me, intent on inflicting all the damage his black heart desires. His hand slides down my back, then over the curve of my ass. He squeezes me through the fabric of my dress and panties. It's a lot of fabric, but I can still feel the heat from his hand like a brand against my bare skin.

He squeezes me again, then slides his hand between my legs to give my pussy the same attention. I don't know if it's the way he handles me, rough and careful at the same time, or knowing that at any moment a guard could come around the corner and spot us, but arousal throbs between my thighs and heat spreads to my core.

I still want him to stop. He can continue this in the car, but it's too risky here.

"Calvin, please, can we go?"

In answer, he presses his finger into the cleft between my legs, even through all the fabric.

A thrill shoots through me at the stimulation. It's so wrong on so many levels, but as the blunt tip of his finger moves toward my clit, every muscle in my body is taut with anticipation.

He stops just before he touches it.

I sag a little, but I swear it's relief and not disappointment. I'm glad he came to his senses. I'll feel so much better once we—

Rather than release me and walk out of the temple like we were about to do in my head, he reaches down and bunches up the yards of fabric around my legs. Cool air hits my bare skin. Before I can question what he thinks he's doing, he cinches it at my waist and holds the wrinkled fabric to the side with one hand while using the other to drag my panties down.

"Calvin," I whisper, scandalized.

"Shh," he murmurs against my ear as he tugs the fabric down, exposing my ass. "Do you think anyone has ever fucked in here?" he asks, leaving my panties around my thighs and running his fingers across my pussy entrance.

Ignoring the throb, I say, "Of course not. It's a *temple*."

His hand grazes my pussy but he doesn't push any fingers into me. Instead, he runs his hand over the curve of my ass and squeezes, then gives it a little smack.

It's as if the sound reverberates through the entire museum. My eyes widen and my heart jumps. "Are you crazy?"

He smiles, then runs his other hand down the front of my throat. "Do you want to feel these ancient sandstones on your bare tits, Hallie?"

Shaking my head, my cheeks scarlet, I hiss, "No."

"I think you do. Too cautious to take it for yourself, but you're curious." His hand on my ass slides up the middle of my back until he's got hold of my zipper. I feel the material give as he begins to unzip it but I grab it with both hands before it can fall.

This displeases him. He drops the dress and grabs my hands, gathering them together and planting them over my head against the wall. He shackles them there with one hand and uses the other to unfasten my bra once the dress falls off.

My breasts spring free and his hungry gaze hits them. He grabs them and palms them one at a time, then smashes them against his warm arm and presses me closer to the wall. He moves his arm and smashes my bare tits against the cool sandstone, then he brings his body against my back so I'm trapped between him and the wall, unable to move away.

"How does it feel?" he murmurs in my ear.

My heart thunders. "Like someone could walk around that corner and see us like this at any given moment."

He doesn't sound as afraid of that as I am. "Yeah? You think the guard would make me stop? Or do you think he'd come closer and watch your face as my finger moving inside you makes you moan? Do you think he'd be turned on when I bend you over right here and shove my cock into you? Do you think he'd wish he could do it instead?"

I swallow, trying to push back against him to move away from the wall, but he doesn't let me. He keeps me caged here, now almost completely naked. My dress and bra have fallen to the ground, but the panties are still stuck around my thighs.

My pussy is exposed enough for him to easily slide his hand between my legs, so he does. He pushes into me and I'm so ashamed when he slides in easily, my pussy already slick with arousal.

He groans when his finger plunges all the way to the knuckle, releasing my wrists and locking his arm around my neck instead. I grab onto his arm, but he doesn't pull it too tight. He just wants to keep me close, keep me controlled.

"I want to leave," I whisper.

"I know," he murmurs, pushing a second finger into me. He pulls both out and pushes them back in, simulating fucking. He keeps me close and

listens to every tiny sound I make as he does it again and again.

When he pulls his fingers out of me, I know they're coated in arousal. I know because he brings them up to show me.

Embarrassment burns its way to the tops of my ears, but he's not just showing me to embarrass me. Keeping his arm locked tightly around my throat, he moves his hand and wipes his fingers across the sandstone wall.

I gasp as he leaves wet marks on the cracked surface. My eyes are wide with sheer horror, then he pulls me back and wipes the rest on my bare tits. I forget to breathe, so utterly horrified. His arm drops from my neck so abruptly that I feel momentarily bereft, then he grabs a fistful of my hair and smashes my face against the wall.

"Brace your hands," he orders, voice low.

Heart hammering, I do as he says without thinking about it. I swallow as he unzips his pants, darting a glance at the temple's entrance. It feels like we're being too loud, or maybe too quiet. We've been in here for too long. They should come over to peek inside and make sure we're not doing anything we shouldn't be.

Calvin grabs my hips and positions me how he wants me. The horror that blossomed earlier expands as I realize he truly is going to fuck me in this temple with guards just outside.

Oh my god.

We're going to get caught. There's no way we won't. No fucking way.

"Calvin, please." I try one more time as he brings the smooth crown of his bare cock between my thighs. "Not here. Please. Let's just leave. I won't fight you in the car, I promise. Or I will if you want me to, I'll fight and claw and try like hell to get away from you. I'll do whatever you want, just please not here. I don't want to get caught."

I can tell my offer entices him because he pauses and actually seems to consider it. Maybe he's envisioning me crying out for help, crawling across

the limo floor as he drags me back, wrenches my thighs apart, and drives into me.

I bet he'd like that.

I'll let him do it if he just lets me put my damn clothes back on right now. At the very minimum, I'm certain we will get a lifetime ban if we're caught, and I love the Met.

At worst, tonight will end with the pair of us locked in a jail cell together, and I don't want to be locked in a cell with him, either.

Been there, done that.

"I do like the idea of you trying to get away from me while I fuck you... Let's do that sometime this week."

Oh, my God.

"I'm not seeing you this week. I'm not seeing you ever again. If you want to do it, this is your only chance."

He chuckles like I've said something funny, then guides his cock between my thighs and shoves into me.

I gasp, startled by the intrusion, and grab onto the edge of the wall. "Calvin," I whisper, trying one more time before it's too late. "Please..."

He liked when I begged him the night he drugged me, but it doesn't do me any good now. My pussy clenches around him as he shoves deeper. It's a snug fit and it feels every bit like the invasion it is.

I close my eyes and tell myself I knew this would happen. Not like this, not here, but I knew it would happen tonight. I just have to get through it.

It's not as difficult as it could be.

As he draws back and plunges into my tight heat again and again, the friction against my walls makes it hard to be quiet. I know I can't whimper as he drives into me so hard I have to hug the wall, but it's hard not to. I feel

him in my guts, feel his hands against the flesh of my ass and hips. Moving, marking, gripping as he needs to. I'm still so paranoid of getting caught I keep stealing glances at the temple's entrance, but I keep an eye on the sides, too. I would die if a guard decided to duck in from a side entrance to see what's taking so long and found me naked and getting fucked against the wall of this ancient edifice.

My pussy throbs around Calvin's cock, thrilling at the brutality and sheer danger of it. My whole body trembles as he slams into me. The sound of skin against skin seems to echo off the sandstone.

We're going to get caught, we're going to get caught, we're going to get caught.

"Fuck," Calvin groans, his fingers digging into my hips as he shoves deep into my pussy. "You're so fucking tight."

My grip on the doorway slips. I go to grab on again, but the moment my fingers make contact, I hear something.

A voice.

My heart stops.

A thrilling shiver of fear dances down my spine, freezing the blood in my veins even as Calvin slams into me once more.

I want to tell him I heard something, but I don't want to speak and make more noise.

Calvin didn't hear it. He keeps fucking me, but I hear it again. A voice, and then two voices. Coming closer.

Oh my god.

"Stop," I whisper furiously, trying to dislodge him and move away, but he grabs my hips and wrenches me back where he had me.

"Don't fucking move," he clips.

"Calvin, there are—"

He slams into me more brutally and I have to clap my own hand over my mouth to keep from crying out.

When he pulls back to thrust forward again, I dart away from him, yanking my panties up as I do and bending to grab my dress. “Stop,” I hiss. “People are—”

He grabs my hair, pulling me upright and backing me against the wall.

“Calvin,” I cry quietly, trying to explain, but before I can say another word he tears my panties off, shoves them in his pocket, and then lifts my thigh. He’s inside me again before I can fight him, pinning me to the wall and driving his cock into me, this time while looking me in the eye.

I can’t take it.

“Mr. Cutler?”

Oh my god.

The guard is just on the other side of the wall.

Maybe it’s the fear of knowing we’re caught, maybe it’s the way his cock strokes my walls even as he hears the man on the other side calling out for him. Whatever it is, I plummet into climax with such frightening force that I have to bury my face in Calvin’s neck to keep from crying out. My pussy clenches and clenches, strangling his cock as he pumps his cum into me.

My body goes completely weak. My head swims with bright white light and fuzzy pleasure.

Calvin sets me down carefully, and once he’s sure I can stand, he leans in to whisper in my ear as he buttons up his pants. “Get your clothes on as quickly as you can and slip out the side entrance. Pretend you were in the bathroom and walk back to the table calmly.”

I nod, but that all feels impossible. I’m certain the guard will walk in and see me naked and sweaty and know exactly what just happened.

Calvin meets my gaze once to make sure I understand, then he steps through the open doorway and out onto the porch.

As soon as he's in the next room, I take a step back to gather my things and cringe when I hear the heel scrape across the floor.

Quickly stepping out of my heels, I bend down and pick them up. When I pop back up, I expect to see Calvin and the guard in the doorway, but it's still empty, so maybe they didn't hear.

My hands tremble as I snatch the bra and gown off the floor. I'm so nervous I nearly miss the hole as I shove my legs in and yank the dress up so at least I'll be somewhat covered when the guard inevitably ducks his head in and finds me.

But I can hear Calvin on the other side, asking about one of the reliefs on the wall. I pull the dress together and ease the zipper up slowly so it makes as little noise as possible.

I'm still holding the bra and my shoes when I realize the voices aren't getting closer, but farther away. I hear the sound of Calvin's loafers against the steps and realize he really is leading the guard out of the temple.

As soon as I peek around the corner and can't see them, I gather up my rustling skirts and run barefoot out the side entrance.

I expect to be caught immediately. I expect there to be a stern-looking man in a tan suit ready to yell at me and ban me from ever coming to the museum again.

But the coast is clear.

Barefoot, I make my way off the temple platform.

I slip my heels back on, then gingerly make my way around the platform back to the table.

Calvin sits at the table looking as relaxed as ever. The guard stands nearby and regards me carefully, but I flash him a smile and hope like hell

he doesn't realize the thing I'm holding in my hand is my bra and not a purse.

Standing, Calvin says, "Ready to go, sweetheart?"

I nod my head, but I don't speak. I'm too afraid my composure will crack if I do.

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Chapter Twenty One

Hallie

My dreams that night are a muddled, intoxicating mess.

Calvin and I holding hands as we hurry down the steps of The Met, him in his dashing black tux, me in my wrinkled blue ballgown. Racing back to the limo like two criminals fleeing the scene of their crime, him carrying my clutch because I'm holding my bra and didn't want to draw attention to it.

Horror and fear turning to reluctant amusement as Calvin's eyes flashed with mischief. "So, did you have a good time?"

We drink champagne and drive through the city.

I'm exhilarated and a little drunk.

Calvin grabs me and pulls me onto his lap as we near my apartment.

I can feel the hard bulge of his cock under my ass, but I look away and try to pretend I don't.

He grabs my jaw and wrenches it back, forcing me to look at him.

My stomach pitches from the dark, hungry look in his eyes even after he's already had me.

We're almost to my apartment. It's almost the end.

He tells Hollis to drive around the block.

And then it's a haze of bunched up fabric and bare limbs. Me on my back in the limo, Calvin between my thighs. My nails digging into the soft, buttery leather as he drives his massive cock into me again and again. His

fingers leaving bruises as he holds onto me tight so he can pound even harder.

I'm full of him. So full.

And then ecstasy. Flying high as the orgasm rocked me, as he drove deep and emptied himself inside me for the second time that night.

We pull up in front of my apartment. I'm righting my clothes and hair just in case anybody sees me on the way to my floor.

The end hangs heavy in the air, the last two words that need to be typed on our story. I can feel fingers poised over the keys as I reach for the door handle.

Not Calvin. He still thinks I'll reconsider. He asks me to one more time.

I shake my head no and climb out of the car.

Once I'm safely out of his reach on the sidewalk, I look in and tell him goodbye.

Goodbye.

I'm alone in my bedroom when I wake up from the dream.

Only it's not a dream at all. It's a memory.

A memory of things that actually happened after we left the museum last night, after we got away with something we definitely should not have done.

A night that never should have happened.

At least it's over now.

It's *all* over now. I've honored my promise and fulfilled my end of the bargain. Today I'll make calls about getting my locks changed again so he won't have a key.

It was a wild ride, but it's over now and time to get back to my life.

I sit up in bed with my covers still wrapped around me. I run my hands over my face and try to summon some energy to get out of the bed and start my day.

That's when I hear it—a noise.

I freeze and listen for it again.

It sounded like it came from inside my apartment, but no one else should *be* in my apartment.

I look around for Marie, but she must have already woken up and slunk out of the room. The door is cracked open enough for her to get out.

Maybe she's getting into something in the kitchen. I better go check.

Carefully moving back the blankets, I slide my legs over the edge of the bed, but before my feet touch the ground, I hear another sound—it sounds like something opening and closing. A door?

Marie can't open doors.

I tell myself it could be a neighbor. I hear neighbors getting home all the time.

The walls in this apartment building are thin, but that didn't sound like it was coming from a neighbor's apartment. It really sounded like it came from mine.

Is Calvin in my apartment?

I know he has a key, but I don't want to go out there thinking it's him and find out that—by some coincidence—I'm being robbed.

I look around my cramped room for something that could be used as a weapon, but there isn't much. My writing table and chair, my dresser, Marie's little lounging bed in the corner. Nothing hard, nothing that could hurt.

My gaze stops on the oscillating fan shoved in the corner. This apartment doesn't have central air and I roast in the summer. The only thing

that keeps me from dying of heat exhaustion is probably that fan.

Which happens to have a long metal bar I could use like a bat.

Decision made, I push off the bed and cross the room to dismantle my fan. I pop the bar out of the base and take off the motor and the blades. Once it's just a metal bar, I practice holding it menacingly like a baseball bat, then ease my bedroom door open and creep out into the hall.

I hear more noise now including something that sounds like... a sizzle?

What is that amazing smell?

Confused, I round the corner to my kitchen, but just in case it *is* someone dangerous, I prepare to swing the bat.

Chef Ryan is standing at my stove, cooking. He turns around, appears startled when he sees me wielding my makeshift weapon, then says cautiously, "Good morning."

I sag, dropping my makeshift bat to my side and releasing a sigh of relief.

Seeming to realize I didn't expect him to be here, he says, "Hollis let me in, said you were still asleep. I take it Calvin decided to surprise you."

"Yes, he likes to do that," I murmur, glancing at the grocery bags and kitchen accoutrements on my counter. A couple of things aren't mine.

Chef Ryan gestures to the counter. "He left you a note, it's in the gift bag."

I leave my metal bar propped against the wall and walk over to grab the black envelope sticking out of the gold gift bag. It's a high quality envelope, the fancy kind with rich gold lining like a wedding invitation, but it's just a personal note card. In what I assume must be Calvin's handwriting, it reads, "Good morning, sweetheart. I'm sorry I couldn't be there when you woke up, but I have to work to pay for those lavish dates you so enjoy."

I roll my eyes at his teasing, then read the rest.

“Chef Ryan is preparing you breakfast and lunch so you can concentrate on whatever else you have to do today. I know how much you dislike cooking.”

Reluctantly, my lips tug upward a bit. I’m glad he isn’t here to see it.

The last of it reads, “If you want dinner, you can come to my place and he’ll make it for both of us. I can send Hollis to pick you up.” Beneath that is a decisive dash and his name, as if this craziness could be from literally anyone else.

Lifting my gaze, I assure Chef Ryan, “You do not have to stay to make me lunch. I really appreciate you making me breakfast, but that’s absurd. He’s ridiculous.”

Chef Ryan smiles at me over his shoulder. “No worries, I don’t have to stay. I’ll prep you a nice salad while you eat breakfast, it can chill in the refrigerator until you’re ready to eat it, then you can just sprinkle on the almonds so they’re nice and crisp, drizzle the container of dresser I make to go with it, and voila. I have to stay anyway to clean up the mess.”

I glance at the bags of almonds and dried cranberries on the counter beside what I assume is the container he plans to store my salad in while it chills. “No. Honestly, I can do that. You’ve done too much already.”

“It’s my job, Miss Meadows,” he says gently. “I’m paid to do it. Really, I don’t mind. Your boyfriend wanted to take care of things for you today, so let me do it. I’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

I don’t know how to tell him that it isn’t him being “in my hair” that feels awkward, I’m just not used to people doing things for me. I’ve certainly never had servants, and even though logically I understand he was paid to cook for me today and clean up the mess, it still *feels* like I’m making a stranger take care of me.

I’m still trying to figure it out when he steps away from the stove and grabs a bowl of fresh sliced fruit off the counter. “Here you go, you can start with this if you want to. I’ll have the rest finished in no time.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking the bowl and looking down at the juicy chunks of pineapple, grapes, and strawberries so red and juicy, they make my mouth water. “All my favorite fruits,” I murmur, a bit surprised.

He smiles benignly like he isn’t surprised to hear that. I don’t know what else to do, so I walk around to have a seat at the small island counter where I usually eat meals alone. I pop a piece of pineapple into my mouth, then drag the gift bag in front of me so I can see what’s inside.

There’s a box inside with another note attached. It reads simply, “To hold up your own books someday.”

When I open the box, I find a pair of bookends nestled in a stiff bed of Styrofoam. William the hippo bookends, to be more specific. He must have bought it at the Met gift store as soon as it opened this morning.

That was sort of... thoughtful.

Shaking off the errant thought, I put the hippo back in the gift bag and try not to think too much about what his note says. I don’t know why I even mentioned how I’d love to spend time writing my own books someday. I never share that with anybody.

While I eat the delicious breakfast Chef Ryan has prepared for me, I open my laptop and check my work emails. When I’m done with that, I go grab my phone half-expecting to see a text from Calvin. There aren’t any, but I do have a missed call from Charity.

On my way back to the living room/kitchen area, I call her back. When the line connects, rather than an actual greeting I get a string of curses, each dirtier than the last.

Lifting my eyebrows, I say, “Am I getting charged for this?”

“Sorry. I was busy limping to the bed because *chivalry is dead*,” she says, shouting the last part, presumably for her new husband to hear.

I smile faintly as I take a seat at the counter. “I take it the honeymoon is going well?”

“Fabulous,” she says. “Well, one part fabulous, one part horrific trauma.” She sighs dramatically. “I have been maimed.”

Concern flickers across my face. “Are you okay?”

“We were down at the resort bar drinking and having a good time. You know how Tyler can make friends literally anywhere? Well, he did that.”

She hardly struggles to make friends herself, but I don’t bother remarking since she’s still talking.

“So we’re drinking and talking and having a good time, and me and these other girls decide to play beach volleyball.”

“Uh oh.”

“Yeah. Me drinking plus trying to be athletic?”

“You were asking for trouble,” I say solemnly.

“I twisted my ankle like a fucking spaz. Of course.”

“Of course,” I agree. “No other way that could have gone.”

“And now I’m laid up in bed, the room is spinning, and *Tyler* laughed at me and kept drinking at the bar instead of bothering to come over and see if I was okay. So now I have to get a divorce.”

“Naturally.” I tap the touchpad on my laptop to wake it up so I can look up what time it is in Bermuda. “Good thing you know a bunch of lawyers.”

“It really fucking is.”

Frowning at my laptop screen, I ask, “Are you only an hour ahead of me?”

“Yes.”

“When did this maiming happen? It’s morning. Are you already drinking?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m on my honeymoon.”

“Or pre-divorce moon, depending on how you look at it.”

Sighing again, she says, “I’m dying.” In the background I hear Tyler asking if she needs ice. “Oh, now you want to help. Aren’t you Prince Charming.”

I crack a smile and go to Google so I can search how to care for a sprained ankle. Skimming the immediate search results, I advise her, “Make sure you elevate it, too.”

“We were supposed to go hiking and see these gorgeous crystal caves today, too. I’m so bummed.”

My lips turn down in sympathy. “Aw, that sucks. I’m sorry.”

She sighs heavily. “Yeah. So, how are things going there?”

Since I can’t tell her the truth, I say, “Well, I haven’t twisted any ankles.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you?”

“Of course, I also don’t have an ocean view, so you’re definitely winning on that front.”

“Now that I’m maimed, I may have to live here forever,” she says dramatically.

“You can’t live there forever. How will you set me up with some awful guy if you never come back to New York?”

It doesn’t occur to me how that might sound to Chef Ryan until he glances at me, surprise written all across his features.

I finish up my call with Charity, but I’m distracted after that, the majority of my focus on getting off the phone before he finishes cleaning up and leaves.

When I do and I set the phone aside, I wait until he meets my gaze, then I tell him, “Calvin isn’t my boyfriend.”

Ryan shakes his head. “Didn’t say anything.”

“I know, but you obviously heard me on the phone and you looked... surprised.”

“Not my business,” he says, but he doesn’t seem to believe it.

“I can see why you would think Calvin is my boyfriend.” My brain tells me to stop, that it doesn’t matter, that I don’t owe this man I’ll never see again any explanations about why I would be going on dates with men other than Calvin, but I can’t seem to let it go. “But honestly, he isn’t. He never was. He never will be. It’s not like that.”

Offering a flaccid smile, he nods his head. “All right.”

His refusal to let me off the hook keeps me feeling... well, on the hook. “I feel like you don’t believe me.”

He shrugs. “I don’t get many jobs like this where someone is paying me to cook for a romantic interest who isn’t their girlfriend or boyfriend, but again, it isn’t my business. Your relationship, however you like to define it, is your business and yours alone. I’m not here to spy for Calvin, I’m here to cook you breakfast and make you lunch so you can focus on your work today.” He shoulders the canvas bag he brought with him. It looks a lot lighter than it must have when he brought it in stuffed with groceries and the cooking accessories he needed.

I’m still a bit uncomfortable with his opinion of things, but I know I can’t fully express why I’m not in the wrong without telling him things I don’t want to share. Forcing myself to let it go, but oddly desperate to extend his stay another moment, as if that will change his mind, I ask, “Is there an address I can bring back the rest of your things after I’m finished with them and they’ve been cleaned?”

He shakes his head, making his way to the door. “Nope. Calvin paid for them, they’re yours to keep.”

“Oh. Well, thank you for coming today.” I follow him to the door.

He opens it and turns back to give me a half-smile. “No problem. Like I said, it’s my job.”

“Right,” I say a tad awkwardly. I still feel the urge to keep explaining myself, but I resist.

Ryan leaves, and I shut and lock the door. It reminds me of the calls I have to make today to find someone who can come change my locks immediately since I don’t know how to do it myself.

I guess I shouldn’t feel so guilty about Calvin’s gesture, or anything else. He took things off my to-do list by having Ryan come, but he put things on it, too. If Calvin hadn’t interfered, I wouldn’t have to get my damn locks changed today.

I know I only feel conflicted and upside down because Chef Ryan doesn’t have all the information. I know Calvin is all kinds of bad news. If I had any doubt, I would only need to look at the web he has already spun around my life in the short time I’ve known him. Everywhere I look there’s his silk. Given just a little more time, there’d be so much I wouldn’t be able to see through it.

Nodding, more sure than I was a moment ago, I let go of the discomfort that resulted in knowing someone was disapproving of me and go to my computer so I can get on with my day—and my life without Calvin Cutler in it.

Chapter Twenty Two

Calvin

All day I watch Hallie try to rub me out of her life like a wine stain on a silk shirt.

After Chef Ryan leaves, she gathers up everything I've bought her. She drapes the gown over her couch in its garment bag, boxes up the rest in an empty Amazon prime box. She deliberates over the necklace I left her at Charity's wedding. I'm not immediately sure why, but she grabs her phone and texts for a minute before grabbing the jewelry box and tossing it in the box as well.

Out of curiosity, I open the side drawer on my desk and check my clone of her phone to see what she said. Apparently, she hadn't firmly determined whether or not the necklace was from me, so she decided to ask Charity if it was a gift from her. When Charity replied, "What are you talking about?" Hallie sent back a "never mind" and a "feel better soon!" and then decided to get rid of it.

A fair reaction, I suppose.

I wait for her to take the box outside to throw it in her trash so I can send Hollis to retrieve it for me—I'm sure she'll regret the rash move later and want her things back—but it never happens. She boxes it all up and stares at it, but then she seems to get frustrated and walks away.

Next on her to-do list is to make phone calls about getting her door locks replaced immediately—today, if possible. She calls several different places, but none have availability for today. A couple went to voice mail, so she left messages.

Seeing an opportunity, I grab my phone and text Arson's burner phone to request that he "call her back" to schedule an appointment to change her

locks. I tell him it needs to be today and dirt cheap so she goes with him. He shoots back a colorful response, but assures me it will get done.

Assurances are nice, but I don't feel at ease about it until her phone rings and she begins lighting up at all the good news. What? There's availability to come today? *And* you'll charge me less than half of anyone else I've called?

Moments after she hangs up, Arson sends me a message saying it's done and he'll send a guy around in an hour or so.

"Make sure it's someone you trust beyond a shadow of a doubt," I text back. "I don't want anyone else having a key to her place."

"Would you feel better if I went myself?"

"Yes," I answer immediately.

"Price is doubled in that case."

That's an irrelevant detail and he knows it, so I don't bother responding.

Since Hallie seems to be in the bathroom and I don't have cameras installed there to watch her, I decide to get some actual work done. I don't have any meetings today, but I take a call, make a call, respond to some emails, and then movement from the monitor catches my attention again.

Hallie has emerged from the bathroom, dressed and ready for the day. Half of her hair is pulled back and secured with a barrette while the rest is left down. She's wearing a silver metallic skirt reminiscent of a go-go dancer with a loose-fitting light pink sweater. The material looks so soft my fingers itch to touch it. I envision her being here when she steps out of my bathroom dressed and ready for today. Close enough that I can reach out and run a hand down her arm. Slide it around her waist and yank her back into me so I can feel more of her body as I nuzzle my face into her neck and inhale her intoxicatingly feminine scent.

In my vision of how that moment would go if she were here, she smiles.

On the video monitor where she's all alone, she doesn't.

She slips on a pair of low heels the same muted pink as her top and checks the time before apparently deciding she has time for lunch before Arson gets there.

It should at least bore me watching her eat. I should be able to content myself that it's unlikely she'll do anything exciting in that short stretch of time. It should be *easy* not to watch.

It isn't.

I don't know why I can't stop watching her, but when the smaller window in the top corner of my screen registers a bald, tattooed man at her door, tension gathers in my shoulders.

Maybe I wanted to watch and make sure everything went smoothly. Doesn't make sense, though. I trust Arson—as much as anyone can trust a professional criminal, anyway—but I still find myself tense as she opens the door with a big warm smile to greet him.

Jealousy pinches me. Ridiculous fucking jealousy—she's only greeting him so happily because she thinks she's establishing some boundary against me and he's there to help, but her smiles belong to me, goddammit, and I don't want her giving any to him.

I guess it doesn't help that Arson is a good-looking man that radiates danger, that he's the kind of man women tend to find appealing, and sweet misguided Hallie thinks she's allowed to go out on dates with men who aren't me.

It's adorable how she doesn't realize she's mine yet.

It would *not* be adorable if she found herself attracted to Arson, though, so I watch closely, making sure she shows no such signs.

Realistically, I know even if she were interested, it wouldn't matter. Arson knows Hallie belongs to me so he won't touch her, but I'll feel uneasy until *she* knows that.

It's impossible not to feel the stirrings of possessiveness as I watch her follow him through the apartment, offering him drinks like a polite host and more smiles that belong to me. Watching her with him reminds me so much of the first version of her that caught my eye, her in the red party dress with Jackson at her side.

Before I stole her happiness.

I'd like to give it back, but the stubborn brat won't give me an opportunity.

I suppose it's fair of her to feel that way, I just don't care.

I want what I want, and I'll have it at the end of the day. If she's wise, she'll give in before she makes me break everything around her.

I guess we'll see.

Some of the tension in my shoulders eases when Arson finishes and leaves her apartment. I watch on the monitor as she examines her brand new door lock, trying the key she thinks I won't have a copy of and making sure her home is secure.

So fucking cute. I can't help smiling.

Especially because she looks so damn proud of herself once she closes the door and gives it one last look. I can see it in her carriage, in her puffed up chest. She's *so damn proud* that she thwarted me, I have to curb the urge to buy her another present.

I won't.

I'd like to, and I'm not accustomed to denying myself things I want, but I need to see how these next few days go without me. I want to see if, given the opportunity, she might miss me the way I already miss her.

I'm tempted to go to her apartment several times over the next week.

It's a long time to be without her.

Rationally, I realize I've spent nearly *every* day of my life without her and that's an absurd thing to think, but it's how I feel all the same.

The idea skates across my mind once or twice that perhaps my bed wouldn't feel so empty if I filled it with someone else, but the notion is profane. The other side of my bed belongs to Hallie now. Hers is the only naked body I want pressed against the silk sheets, the only flesh I want to caress and restrain as I fight to bury my cock inside her.

No, a poor substitute won't do.

I have to have the real thing.

I palm my cock as it strains against the fabric of my slacks. I've only been home from work for a few minutes, but my first stop was my office where I have a larger computer monitor set up to watch her on. I've scarcely done a damn thing this week but watch Hallie. Watch her draw in her room, watch her routine with Marie, watch her hum while she does housework like a fucking Disney princess.

Currently, I'm watching her walk around her apartment in a towel with damp hair after a shower. I'm bingeing her life like most people binge shows on Netflix, and I'm particularly fond of this episode.

She doesn't go to her bathroom to get dressed for bed. She goes to her bedroom. Since I have a camera set up in there, I get to watch as she drops the towel thinking she's all alone. Her back is to me at first, but I certainly don't mind. The sight of her bare, luscious ass stirs memories of that first night, her ass an upside down heart I could have gazed at forever as I plunged into her tight little body.

Hunger hardens my cock anymore. I'm alone and she's naked, so I unzip my pants and take my cock out so I can give it a good firm stroke as Hallie turns and I get a view of those lovely tits of hers.

Perfect.

She's perfect.

It's harder than it has been any other night since we've been apart not to barge in and take her right now. Her tits jiggle as she crosses the room to get panties out of her dresser and I groan, palming my cock harder.

Fuck, I want her.

My blood heats, my self-control slipping.

You could have her.

Yes, I could.

Trying to back up and do the right hasn't worked at all. If she misses me even slightly, I certainly can't tell. Every time I glance at my phone, I hope there will be a message from her. Any message, I don't care what it says, I just need to know that I've skated across her mind *once* since she tried to purge me from her life.

On the monitor, I watch her grab an oversized sleep shirt and pull it on. I miss the sight of her naked body instantly, but I'm still aching with need for her. She could wear a fucking garbage bag and I'd still be convinced she's the most stunning woman on the planet.

I need to be inside her body again, but I have to satisfy myself with a peek inside her mind. I watch her texting on the monitor, so I grab my clone of her phone to see what's being said.

"I don't want to go on this date tomorrow."

I scowl, seeing the text is from Hallie to her friend Charity.

"You're going," Charity texts back, a bulldozer like me. No wonder Hallie likes her.

"I'm not ready," Hallie states.

Not ready?

I know she means because of me, but I need more details.

I don't get them because Charity thinks she means she isn't ready to move on from *Jackson*.

"Listen babe, dude was a stinky piece of shit and you're so much better off without him. Imagine missing dog shit you scraped off the bottom of your shoe, because that's pretty much the equivalent of missing Jackson."

"Why do you hate him so much?" Hallie texts back. "I mean, I know why I hate him so much (that's so not what I meant by I'm not ready, btw) but I don't see why you do."

"I don't hate trash, I'm just happy once it's been taken out. Now, get your hot little ass some sleep tonight because tomorrow you're meeting your soulmate."

"Ugh," Hallie texts back. "I don't wanna."

"Too bad!" Charity replies.

I grab the notepad on my desk and jot down a note for myself, then I scroll up because it seems I've missed some messages. I knew Charity had mentioned something about Hallie going on a date with some guy she liked for her, but I didn't realize it was actually happening.

Tomorrow night.

That is quite fucking displeasing.

Once I'm all caught up on the texts I missed and I have all the information I need.

When it was only an idea, it was cute how she thought I'd let her go out with another man.

Now that it's a reality, I guess I'll have to show her how very wrong she was.

Chapter Twenty Three

Hallie

Turning in the mirror, I tug at the hem of my red dress and debate changing.

I think it's too sexy for a date I don't really want to go on. I'm only wearing the red dress because I really wanted to wear my red slingback pumps, they're suede and they have a cute, glittery bow on the ankle. They're kind of Christmassy—in fact, I think I wore this whole ensemble to Jackson's Christmas party a while back—but I got them at Macy's on sale last year and I absolutely love them.

When I went out with Calvin, I never got to pick my own outfits, so I never got a chance to wear them. If we could've met in a different way and he would have just asked me out like a normal person, I'm sure I would have worn them on a date with him.

Don't think about him.

It should be easy to never think about him, but he left fingerprints on me, invisible ones I'm finding it hard to shake. Even after I cleared all his stuff out of my apartment and changed the locks so I know I'm safe from him, I still feel him here. I can't explain it, I don't even understand it, but it's like he's always here, watching me.

I know he isn't. I know the only piece of him that remains in this apartment are the William the hippo bookends I couldn't bring myself to part with. I like pretty things so it's not like I *enjoyed* getting rid of the beautiful clothes and accessories he sent me to wear on dates with him, but I still did it. It had to be done.

The bookends, though. Those were more meaningful.

I know I shouldn't save anything meaningful from him, but I also really like the bookends because they're William the hippo. I tell myself it's okay to keep them, and only I know why it really isn't, so there's no one to argue with me about it.

I grab a simple black purse to complete the ensemble and stuff it full of the things I know I'll need tonight. I open my wallet to make sure I have cash for a tip, even though I secretly hope my date will be chivalrous and insist on paying for the first date himself. I'm not cheap, I pay for things myself all the time and I'm happy to pay for dates, too, but it feels decidedly unromantic when you're out for the first time and the guy comes out and asks you to pay for your half.

Not that I have high hopes for this guy. The last guy Charity set me up with was a disaster, and I am honestly *not* in the market for a new boyfriend right now. This Lance guy would have to be pretty incredible to change my mind.

But I guess a tiny sliver of me has hope.

I want all that, I really do. I want someone to love me. More than that, I want someone who is *intoxicated* by me. I want kisses that ignite fireworks, warm caresses that express he truly can't get enough of me.

For once, I just want someone to love me wholly and completely, without common sense or restraint.

I'll give every bit of it back, I just...

I've never found anything close.

I guess I know it's a fairy tale. That's not how the real world works. Even if you find love and you get married, you wind up with a husband who laughs his ass off when you twist your ankle on the beach instead of rushing over to make sure you're okay.

None of this is making me more excited to go on this date.

Smiling faintly, I grab my phone and text Charity. "Cough, cough." I press send, then add, "Oh no, I think I'm sick..."

She responds almost instantly. “Then take a shot of Robitussin and get your ass in a cab.”

“Haven’t you heard? Romance is dead. Just let me stay home with Marie and watch Audrey Hepburn movies.”

“YOU ARE OLD,” she answers.

“We’re watching Sabrina next!”

“Cab. Now!”

I slip the phone in my purse and grab my keys, then I make sure to lock up and head downstairs to hail a cab.

As I burst through the door of my apartment building and emerge on the busy city street, I find all the noises and smells I expect when I leave the apartment, but one thing I definitely *don’t* expect, too.

A limo is parked on the curb just outside my apartment.

I know it’s Calvin’s, because Hollis is standing outside of it with a black envelope in his hand.

You have got to be kidding.

“What are you doing here?” I ask cautiously.

“Calvin wanted me to deliver a message to you,” he says, holding out the envelope.

My eyebrows rise. “Did he lose my number?”

Hollis doesn’t answer, just continues to hold the envelope out until I take it.

Sighing, I finally do. I tear it open and yank out the note.

In Calvin’s overbearingly bossy script, it reads:

Hallie,

Don't go on the date tonight.

Meet me instead.

Chef Ryan is preparing dinner for us. Get in the car, and Hollis will bring you to me.

I promise you'll have a better time.

-Calvin

I guffaw, shaking my head with a faint smile at his gall. Whatever he lacks, the man certainly has audacity.

I bring my gaze back to Hollis, still shaking my head. "I'm not getting in that car."

"I would strongly urge you to reconsider."

I hold the letter back out to him. "I would strongly urge *you* to remind Calvin that I fulfilled my end of the bargain. I gave him the only date I promised him, and now we're finished. I'm never having dinner with him ever again. I'm never doing *anything* with him ever again. He can forget me like I hope to forget him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I don't want to be late to meet my date."

Hollis sighs.

I turn away and start putting distance between us on the sidewalk so he doesn't grab me and force me into the vehicle.

Once I'm a few yards away, I feel safer, but Hollis calls after me, "Do this the easy way, Hallie."

I turn just enough to toss back over my shoulder, "Tell Calvin I said sometimes you can't get what you want."

Hollis hangs his head and mutters something I can't hear from this far away.

I wasn't excited for the date before, and I'm still not really *excited*, but I do feel strangely energized after slipping through Calvin's fingers.

Maybe this date will be just what I needed, after all.

When I first encounter Lance Matthews, I can see immediately why Charity set me up with him. He smells like trust fund and smiles as he gives me the same generic onceover he's undoubtedly given hundreds of women before me.

"Charity didn't tell me you were such a knockout," he jokes with a smile I can't help but find a little smarmy.

We both know that's not true. Charity undoubtedly talked me up and made me sound better than I am to sell him on the idea of spending his Friday night with me when he almost certainly would have been spending it picking up girls at a club instead.

It's just a sense, but I have a strong feeling if this date doesn't go a certain way, he'll still end up there.

His hand moves toward me and I want to move away, but he touches my waist before I can think of a polite way to dodge him and pulls me in for an immediate hug.

He smells like too much cologne. Probably not cheap cologne, but too much all the same.

I tell myself to relax, that I'm being too critical, but I knew I would be. This is why I didn't want to come out in the first place. I'm not *ready*, but Charity doesn't have the patience to wait for me to be.

Smiling a bit sheepishly, I tell him, "I apologize in advance if it turns out Charity wasted both our time."

“Nah, are you kidding me?” he says as he drops my hand and walks next to me without touching me. “We’ll have a great time tonight.”

Although his hands don’t touch me, his eyes do. I feel uncomfortable as his gaze rakes over me again, and not uncomfortable in the way Calvin made me feel sometimes. Somehow worse than that.

Stop.

I shake my head to clear Calvin out of it and follow Lance inside the restaurant.

He has a reservation, so we don’t have to wait too long for a table. He still insists we have a drink at the bar while we wait to loosen up. I sip my cocktail and try to remember how a first date is supposed to work. It has been a while since I’ve been on one, and apparently it is not like riding a bike.

He asks me what I do for fun before he asks what I do for work, but maybe Charity has already told him. He tells me he’s a finance guy and I nod because I already knew that. Then he starts telling me about this trip to Thailand he took with his college buddies earlier this summer and what an incredible experience it was. That does sound cool, I’ve always wanted to travel, but he doesn’t really give me a chance to say that. He drones on and on about himself and his friends that I don’t know. It seems like he thinks he’s impressing me as he goes on to tell me about this girlfriend he had at the time, a reality TV star he won’t name because surely I’d recognize her.

I start looking around for an excuse to get a break from him as soon as my drink is drained.

I miss home. I miss Marie and my couch. I want to curl up with her and watch old movies tonight instead. I wish I could leave now without being incredibly rude.

Shoving down the wave of sadness, the sense that I’m so much lonelier here than I would be actually alone, I freshen up my lipstick and check my phone.

I guess I'm expecting to see a message from Calvin since I stood him up again, but there isn't one.

I wonder what multiple course meal Chef Ryan made us for dinner.

A vision springs to mind of Calvin sitting in his massive apartment all alone, eating it by himself since I didn't show up.

I remember him saying he felt lonely a lot of as kid, and tonight I probably gave him that same feeling.

I must be about to start my period or something, because inexplicably I feel a little emotional about not being at Calvin's for dinner instead of where I am.

Maybe lunacy is contagious.

Get it together, Hallie.

Calvin's feelings are *not* my responsibility.

Doing my best to shake it off, I put my phone away and head back out to the busy dining area.

A blonde mass of gelled hair atop a tall, lean body stands by the bar waiting for me. I flash him a tiny smile as I approach.

"Our table's ready," he tells me.

I nod and start to follow him, but he motions for me to move ahead of him, so I guess I'm taking the lead. I greet the hostess and give her his name, then she grabs a couple of menus and leads us to the table.

When I turn around to make sure he followed, I see his head down and he's texting.

Jackson used to do that all the time when we went out to eat. Drove me crazy.

His gaze is still glued to his phone as he texts someone else, so I walk around the table and sit down. Several seconds pass, then a few more. Seeming to realize it's a bit rude that he's still texting and ignoring me, he

peeks up from his chat. “Sorry babe, give me like two more seconds. I had a text from a friend and he’s just blowing my mind.”

Babe?

Don’t like that.

Ignoring it like he’s ignoring me, I open the menu and busy myself with deciding what I’ll order for dinner.

Finally, he finishes his other conversation and takes a seat across from me at the table.

I look up from my menu. “Is everything okay with your friend?”

He looks up as if startled to see me sitting here. “Oh. Yeah, yeah, all good. My buddy Chuck was just freaking out and I had to talk him down.”

My forehead creases with concern. “Oh no. Well, is everything good now? Do you have to go? If you need to go see your friend, I totally understand.”

He waves me off, then grabs his cloth napkin and unfolds it on his lap. “Nah, you’re sweet, but nothing I can do for him, unfortunately. He’s been dating this trashy girl we’ve all been warning him to lose, she’s clearly only after his money, but she must have a mouth like a Hoover because he can’t see it.”

Ew.

“We’re always joking with him to make sure it’s double-wrapped with her and he calls us assholes. Well, she’s pregnant, so who’s the asshole now?”

Maybe still you.

I don’t say that, obviously.

“What makes her so... trashy?” I ask.

“It’s hard to put into words, but you know it when you see it, you know? She’s not a lady like you.” His gaze warms as he looks me over

again. “You obviously take care of yourself. You’d be surprised how many women don’t these days.”

Ew!

“I don’t like when guys say things like that,” I announce, grabbing my own napkin and unfolding it on my lap. “It’s always a slight to other girls, and I think it’s kind of asshole. I don’t need to be better than other girls to feel good about myself, and I dress in messy, slouchy clothes when I’m at home relaxing plenty, so I don’t want you to think I’m always well-polished and lovely. I’m not.”

He seems startled that I didn’t lap up his compliment like a good little kitten. “Sorry. Wasn’t trying to offend. And I didn’t mean it like that, like god forbid you wear sweatpants, it’s just with her...” He stops, realizing this isn’t going the way he wants it to. “Never mind. I think we’ve had a small miscommunication,” he says with a conciliatory smile.

“Maybe,” I say with a smile of my own.

“He wasn’t even planning to have kids, and now she’s trapped him, so I just feel bad for the guy, you know?”

Every word out of his mouth makes me enjoy him less. “Pregnancy prevention is not a woman’s job. She can’t get pregnant without his help. He has the dick, right? He should put a condom on it if he doesn’t want babies.”

He laughs, not like I’m funny, but like I’m adorable to have such strong feelings about things. “All right, all right. I can see we aren’t going to agree on this.”

I’m not amused, so this time I don’t bother responding.

Trying to lighten the mood (or read me, who knows?) he asks jokingly, “Hey, you don’t want babies anytime soon, do you?”

I smile sweetly. “Not yours.”

His eyebrows rise in surprise, then a bark of laughter shoots out of him. “I like you, Hallie Meadows. I think we’re going to get along very well.”

That makes one of us.

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Chapter Twenty Four

Hallie

Dinner takes an eternity to get through.

We don't order dessert because Lance is afraid if we do, I'll get fat before we make it to his apartment. He doesn't say so explicitly, but it's implied by his obsession with all things superficial.

I cannot wait to never see him again.

On the way out, he actually holds the door for me, which is the first remotely gentlemanly behavior he has exhibited tonight. The way he looks down at me after he follows me out the door makes it seem like he thinks this date went much better than I think it went.

"Well, I had a good time with you tonight," he says.

"Yeah, me too," I lie, looking down at my purse.

"Sorry if the night got off to a weird start. I know this place is a bit tricky to find, and then the whole drama with Chuck."

"Don't worry about it."

I never want to think about it or him again. I just want to go home, kick off my pretty-but-uncomfortable slingbacks, and curl up with my kitty.

The restaurant entrance *was* in a weird place, though, so we have to trek through an alley to get back to a road busy enough for a taxi cab to pick me up.

"So, you want to head to my place?"

I look over at him, a little stunned he would even ask. "No."
Remembering my manners, I say, "Uh, I'm not really a... I don't home with

guys on first dates.”

“Classy and hard to get, huh?” he says, smiling that smarmy smile again. “I like that.”

Ew. So much ew.

I need a shower after spending so much time with him. I’m going to kill Charity. She’s officially never setting me up with anyone ever again. Her idea of a dating pool is my idea of a sewer, and I am not here for it.

He grabs my wrist, yanking me from my thoughts and catching me off-guard. Before I can ask what he’s doing, he walks me back against the brick alley wall and says, “Or maybe you just want to be chased, hm?”

“No. Ew.” That one slips out, totally by accident. I am horrified, but I’ve thought “ew” so much tonight, I’m actually kinda surprised this is the worst one I’ve inadvertently vocalized. “Er, I think I stepped in... something,” I mutter, poorly offering up a less mortifying reason for saying that. “Anyway, no. I’m tired and it’s late...”

“One kiss.”

He thinks he’s being sexy, but I do not agree. The last thing in the world that I want is his lips on any part of me. I don’t appreciate the way he’s towering over me. Looking up at him, my chest tightens. I press myself against the wall, a sensation of panic closing in quickly.

Uh oh.

A frown of concern flickers across Lance’s face. “Hallie?”

I’m close to hyperventilating, and the closer I get, the worse the panic is.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I’ll back off,” he says, immediately backing away.

I shake my head, trying to assure him it’s not him, I got triggered, but it’s not his fault. He couldn’t have known it would trigger me. *I didn’t even know.*

But I can't squeeze any words out past the panic.

I try to breathe slowly, try to reason with myself that he's not even near me anymore so there's no reason to freak out.

"I don't know what to..." He backs up more, but this time it's less like he's trying to reassure me, and more like he's ready to bail.

He wouldn't actually bail on a person on the verge of a panic attack, would he?

I don't get to find out.

When we started walking down this alley way, a man in baggy jeans and a hoodie was walking in our direction, but it didn't draw much of my attention. I might have felt a little warier alone, but with a man walking beside me, I wasn't too worried.

I guess that background instinct was dead wrong, because the man steps up behind Lance and calmly presses the long barrel of a gun against his temple.

"Wallet."

Lance freezes.

My panic subsides quickly, pushed out by a more urgent sense of fear.

"Whoa," Lance says, slowly raising his hands like he's a criminal and the guy's a cop. "Easy, pal."

"Wallet," the hooded figure says again, more distinctly.

"I don't have much cash on me, but what I have is yours," Lance says. "Let's just keep cool. I'm gonna reach for my wallet slowly."

The man behind him doesn't move a muscle. I can't tell if he's reassured by Lance's calm demeanor, or if he even cares less.

Lance takes his wallet out, but instead of handing it over, he takes out the cash and passes it back over his shoulder without looking. "There. You can take it and go. We don't want any trouble."

Rather than let him go, the man crooks a finger and says, “Come over here, sweetheart.”

Me?

Of course me, he’s not calling *Lance* sweetheart.

I swallow hard, then slowly take a couple of steps forward.

“Like he said,” I say, my voice wobbling. “We really don’t want any trouble.”

“No heroes here,” Lance agrees. “Go ahead and leave, we just want to go home.”

“Give me your purse,” the hooded man says.

There’s something about his voice that feels familiar. Like I’ve heard it before, but I can’t quite place it.

I start to hand over my purse, but instead of taking it, the man grabs me, turns me around, and locks me against his chest. A half scream escapes me before he gets his hand over my mouth.

“Shh, no screaming. You scream, I shoot your boyfriend in the throat, that’s how this works.”

My heart plummets.

We’ve traded places now. I’m the one with my back to the hooded figure and Lance backs closer to the wall.

Lance is tall, taller than the other guy, but I’m not. I’m smaller and easier to control, I guess, because he was pretty hands-off with Lance, but now that he has a hold of me, he’s a lot more touchy feely. Mostly he’s just holding me back against him, but rather than point the gun at my temple, he drags the barrel down my chest until it rests right between my cleavage.

“That’s a nice dress you’re wearing there, sweetheart.”

Oh my god oh my god oh my god.

Nodding at Lance, he asks, “What’s your name?”

“Lance.”

“Lance. You’ve got a nice little girlfriend here, Lance. Do you mind if I cop a feel?”

“Um...” Lance has never been this uncomfortable. I have. “I... I don’t... She’s not really my girlfriend.”

“No?” the guy behind me asks, his voice rising with the kind of interest that makes me immediately sure he is an asshole. Just an absolute asshole. This isn’t some tweaker looking for a fix, he’s not some sloppy half-assed criminal. There’s a cockiness to him.

Lance avoids my gaze and shakes his head.

“Mind if I take her, then?” the guy asks.

“What?” I shriek, but my voice is muffled beneath his hand.

That’s when it hits me. I see ink on his fingers covering my mouth, and it’s ink I’ve seen before. I noticed it the other day when he was installing a lock on my door.

“That’s fucking sheisty,” he says.

John? He said his name was John, but maybe that wasn’t true.

“You see this, sweetheart? This little prick is ready to let me carry you off and do all sorts of nasty shit to you? You know I’m into nasty shit, right?” he asks Lance.

Poor Lance is out of his depths here. He looks lost. He doesn’t know what this guy wants to hear.

“Tie you up,” he says, taking the gun out of my cleavage and pointing it at Lance’s kneecap. “Make you scream.”

Thwip.

Lance shouts. I try to, too, because this fucking lunatic just *shot him* in the knee.

“Oh my god!” I try to scream, fighting like hell to get away from him, but it’s like trying to break apart stone. This guy is solid and completely unshakable as he starts to drag me backward.

“Now, you quiet down and let me take your pretty little ass to the car or I’ll take the other one, too.”

“Please,” I cry frantically against his hand, tears springing to my eyes.

My heart is hammering so wildly, I’m afraid it will burst out of my chest. I can’t think fast enough to formulate words, but even if I could, I’m not sure I could get them out.

I hear Lance wailing and swearing so I try to look back at him as the dark figure hauls me away.

“Don’t know why you bother,” he says casually, as if he didn’t just shoot someone. “Fucker was fine to let me rape you, so I don’t see why you’d care if I fired one measly bullet into his leg. Could’ve been a lot worse. I could’ve shot him dead.”

“Why are you doing this?” I cry out against his hand.

“Keep walking or I go back and finish the job. Don’t fucking test me on this, Hallie. I don’t have patience for bullshit.”

My blood freezes when he says my name. I realize of course he knows my name, he’s the man who came and changed my lock, but how the hell did changing my locks lead to this? It’s not like he spotted anything valuable in my apartment and thought maybe I had money.

Unless he saw the gown and the box of things from Calvin and got the wrong idea.

“Look, I’m not rich. I don’t have any money. Nothing I own is worth stealing. You’ve made a mistake.”

The car waiting at the end of the alley is a black Escalade. He opens the door and shoves me inside. I hit the ground palms first with my feet still on the sidewalk. He grabs my hips and hauls me back on my ass as he climbs in after me.

I'm sprawled gracelessly on the floor of the vehicle when he reaches over and closes the door.

"Go," he says.

The car starts rolling forward, then swerves as we get back on the road.

I push myself up and sit on my butt on the floor, looking around in utter confusion. I thought this guy was a locksmith, but the back of this Escalade is decked out like a luxury airplane cabin. I turn around slowly, gazing at the massive TV screen, the iPad screens on the walls, the... security camera bubbles?

Where the hell am I?

Tentatively, I turn to look back at the man. His hood is pulled down now and he's tugging off a balaclava he wore under it just to be safe.

His gaze hits mine, but he's clearly not concerned about me seeing his face.

"I knew it was you," I tell him.

"Yeah?" His eyebrows rise. "You want a fucking sticker?"

My cheeks flush. I was going to tell him I recognized him by his ink, but he clearly doesn't give a damn.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"I'm nobody."

I've lost his interest, apparently. He tosses his ski mask on the seat beside him and sits back, seemingly content for me to sit here on the floor at his feet.

"Where are you taking me?"

His gaze flickers back to me on the floor. “You ask a lot of questions.”

My eyes widen. “You kidnapped me! I have questions.”

“I saved you from Patrick Bateman,” he states. “You’re welcome.”

I can only gape at him.

He was a lot nicer when he was changing my locks.

He doesn’t say anything else for a while, doesn’t really pay attention to me at all. Given all the stuff he said back in the alley, though, I still have pressing concerns.

Feeling my expectant gaze on him, he sighs and looks back at me impatiently. “Yes?”

“Can’t you just tell me where you’re taking me? Are we going to your place, or...?”

He sits forward, bracing his palms on his muscular thighs so his inked fingers are on full display. “Why? Looking forward to it?”

My heart sinks down to my hollowed out stomach.

“Nah, I’m not your type, am I?” he continues. “You like those pretty rich boys.”

Glancing pointedly around the insanely luxurious cabin of this car, I say, “Doesn’t seem like you’re hurting for money. Doesn’t seem like you’re a locksmith, either.”

“Hey, I’m a locksmith. I’m lots of things. A jack of all trades, I guess you could call me.”

“Is your name really John?”

“What do you think?” he answers.

“So what is it?” I ask. I don’t know why, I don’t really expect him to answer, but then he does.

“Arson.”

My eyebrows rise. “Because you’re someone who likes setting fires?”

“What can I say?” he says, giving up his intimidating position and relaxing in his seat. “Sometimes the shoe fits.”

“Is that your real name?”

He gestures in my general direction. “Are those your real tits?”

Instinctively, I cover my cleavage with one hand and frown. “Yes?”

He nods. “No wonder Cal’s so fucking obsessed with you.”

My heart skips a beat. “You... you know Calvin?”

“I know a lot of people.”

I sit on the floor, stunned by this revelation for longer than I probably should be.

Calvin told me he knew men who could kidnap me and bring me to him, I just... never thought that would actually happen.

I guess now at least I know where I’m going, and that I’m unlikely to be harmed before I get there. I know in my bones Calvin wouldn’t have sent this guy for me if he thought he might hurt me on the way to him.

“Why’d you say all that stuff back there? About me, about...”

Making me scream.

Arson shrugs. “Wanted to feel the guy out. Plus, abducting you makes more sense if I wanted to jam my cock down your throat, doesn’t it?”

Jesus, that’s blunt.

“But you’re not actually... going to,” I say, just to make sure.

He smirks. “Nah. Don’t worry. You’re not for me.”

“Just a package you’re delivering to some other lunatic?”

His smirk cracks into a ghost of a real smile. “Glad you understand.”

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Chapter Twenty Five

Calvin

My lovely Hallie is not nearly as happy to see me as I am to see her.

I suppose I should have expected that.

Not only because I sent Arson—who's *not terribly good company*—to retrieve her, or even because I had him shoot her date, which she probably wasn't thrilled about. I'm sure both things contributed to her displeasure, but the real problem runs much deeper than those little road bumps.

I like her more than she likes me.

That's the real problem.

That's never happened to me before, so I'm not entirely sure how to navigate it.

She's lovely as always and wearing the red dress she wore the night I first saw her. How appropriate. We've come full circle.

I should have just kidnapped her that night and been done with it.

Serves me right for trying to do things the *right* way.

Well, sort of.

Hallie's sulking terribly when Arson hauls her in. She doesn't even speak to me. This time she doesn't seem surprised that Marie is here, but since Arson picked her up for me, I imagine she has figured out that I sent him, and any illusion of safety she had from me was just that: an illusion.

Ignoring both of us as I hand Arson his payment envelope and he responds with a cursory, "Pleasure doing business with you," she walks over to Marie's bed and sinks down next to it so she can hug her cat.

“I’ll let you know if I need anything else,” I tell Arson, and then he leaves.

Hallie sits on the floor with her legs curled behind her and Marie curled up on her lap. Chef Ryan is gone and Hollis isn’t here, so it’s just us and the silence.

She knows I’m standing here, but doesn’t feel like looking at me. Without looking up from Marie as she strokes her, she speaks in a cooler tone I know is meant for me. “You’re a monster.”

“I told you not to go on the date,” I remind her. “I warned you.”

Her gaze snaps to me, her big blue eyes wide. “You didn’t tell me anyone would get hurt!”

In my mind, it seems she should have been able to puzzle that out, but I don’t want to insult her intelligence, so I don’t say that. Besides, it might be unfair. I know her mind doesn’t work the way mine does. “I told you what I wanted, and you know I’ll do whatever it takes to *get* what I want. He’s lucky that kiss didn’t land—that would’ve earned him a second bullet in the other leg.”

Glaring up at me, she asks crudely, “And what if I fucked him?”

Rage surges inside me at the notion. Reveling in a moment of malice in response to her fit of brattiness, I take pleasure in smiling faintly as I tell her, “Then he would be dead.”

She still glares at me, but I can tell by the way she swallows and flinches, she knows I mean it.

Looking back down at Marie and petting her, she asks woodenly, “So, what? I belong to you now?”

“You’ve belonged to me since the moment we met,” I assure her.

“I didn’t agree to that,” she says lowly.

“I don’t care.”

She shakes her head like she can't believe me, but what weapon does the poor thing truly have to use against me? None.

"You'll be staying here now," I tell her. "We tried out living apart. I didn't like it."

"I did," she mutters.

I ignore her and gesture to the corner where I set up her drawing table as close as I could to the one at her apartment with all the same brands of tools since I assume those are her preference, but a better quality desk and chair—and definitely a better view. "I set your work space up over there. You'll still be allowed to do your work, but if you have to go in for a meeting, Hollis will escort you. Unfortunately, I can't trust you to go out on your own yet. Once I know you don't pose a flight risk, you'll be allowed to move around as you please as long as you always come back here."

"And if I don't?"

"You will," I tell her simply, since that's not an option.

"Hollis can't come to my work meetings. That would certainly raise alarms, and since you are technically holding me prisoner here..." She peeks up at me innocently. "I might be inclined to tell someone."

"You won't," I assure her.

"You sound so confident."

"I am." Rather than waste time letting her think my confidence comes from the wrong place, I step into my office and grab a folder off the desk.

She's still sitting on the ground, but she frowns when she sees what I'm carrying. "What is that?"

"My insurance policy." I drop the folder on the table, then turn and offer her my hand so she can stand up for this part.

She eyes my hand warily, then decides to get up on her own rather than accept my help.

Such a brat. I'm going to enjoy punishing her tonight.

Anticipation and pleasure mingle together at the knowledge that she's mine now, she's here, and I can have her anytime I want starting tonight. Everything will be better now. I should have just done this from the start.

I open the folder which is labeled, "Charity."

"Remember the night we met at Purgatory?"

Frowning as her gaze rakes over the contents, she says sourly, "How could I forget?"

"Your friend Charity had quite a bit to drink that night." I lift the top page filled with printed out text messages she doesn't have time to read so she can see a timestamped photo showing that while Hallie was at home in bed recovering from the pussy pounding I gave her, Charity was back at the club leaving with the bartender. I pull back another page of them outside his apartment, liplocked with their hands all over each other. The last one is a much lighter black and white photo that shows her leaving his apartment early the next morning—her wedding day, to be more precise.

"Now, I don't have pictures of them in the act, but I believe these provide a pretty adequate sketch of what happened that night, and the text messages on the first page fill in the gaps."

Hallie sinks back a step, stunned.

"I'm guessing your friend's new husband wouldn't be thrilled to find out she fucked someone else the night before they got married."

She brings a hand to her forehead, reeling. "That can't possibly be... There's no way..."

"She did." I flip to the very back of the folder where a thumb drive is taped down. "For a nominal fee, the bartender was even kind enough to describe their night together in *explicit* detail. That's all right here." I close the folder. "Now, should it ever cross your mind to tell on me or appeal to someone for help in one of the rare moments I allow you out into the world

on your own, Arson has a duplicate of this file and orders to deliver it to Tyler should things here go awry.”

Hallie shakes her head, looking a little lost. I don’t get the impression it’s from the words I’ve just said, though. She’s reeling from the information I’ve dropped on her regarding her friend’s fidelity. “But she loves him.”

“She was drunk. It was probably a mistake. One that would likely end her marriage, though, so...”

She swallows and crosses her arms over her chest in an unconscious gesture of self-comfort. “How long?”

“How long?” I repeat, unsure of her question.

Her resentful gaze flickers to mine. “How long do I have to stay here? How long do I have to... be yours?”

“As long as I want you to be.”

She closes her eyes, inhaling and exhaling very slowly.

Arson told me about the panic attack she nearly had in the alley, but this doesn’t seem like that. She’s just soaking up the impossibility of her position, feeling the narrowness of the space I’m giving her within my walls.

I’m sure it doesn’t feel good when she’s used to absolute freedom, but she knows she has no choice.

I know it, too, but I’m not unkind enough to point it out.

She swallows, eyes still closed, then says, “You want to hear something funny?”

“Sure. I love a good joke.”

Her lips curve up, but it’s a bitter little twist. “I thought you liked me.” She laughs a little, opening her eyes. “How stupid is that?”

“I *do* like you. Very much.”

“If you liked me, you wouldn’t do this to me.”

“It won’t be so bad,” I tell her, drifting closer so I can caress the smooth curve of her jaw.

She turns her face away.

I drop my hand. I’ll have the whole of her soon enough; I won’t force my touch on her just now. “Why don’t you take a nice relaxing bath before bed?” I suggest. “I’ll feed Marie dinner.”

“I don’t require supervision?” she asks bitterly.

“If you’d like to be supervised, I’m happy to oblige.”

She wants so badly to be a brat. I shouldn’t let her get away with so much tonight—it’ll skew her expectations going forward—but I have sympathy for my pretty little dove, rebelling against the cage I’ve erected all around her.

It’s important that she know my supply of sympathy is extremely limited, though, so before I let her go, I grab her wrist and pull her back.

She looks up at me, confused since I just told her to take a bath.

I reach out to caress her face, letting my thumb graze her bottom lip. She tries to turn her head and pull away, so I tighten my grip, forcing her to look at me. Once her resentful gaze is locked on mine, I lean in and kiss her softly.

She doesn’t kiss me back, but I don’t let it drive me crazy this time.

The kiss wasn’t the point; I just wanted to remind her I *can* kiss her—or do anything else to her that I want—anytime I like.

I drop my hand. “Now you may go.”

She glares at me, then turns and storms off toward my bedroom.

Well, I guess it’s *our* bedroom now.

I like the sound of that.

Hallie isn't much for company tonight, but I didn't expect her to be.

I'm waiting for her in the bedroom when she emerges after her bath. Her hair is dry except for the ends and pulled over one shoulder. I left a silk robe hanging up in the bathroom for her, so that's what she's wearing. Tomorrow I will have her things brought over from her apartment. I have a few things here for her already, but she's too mad at me to ask, so she's content to sleep in the robe.

She'll be sleeping in much less than that.

As soon as she's curled up beneath the covers with her back facing me, I slide my arm around her and untie the belt holding the delicate pieces of silk together over her tits. She sighs, aggravated, but doesn't fight me as I push a hand beneath the loose fabric and cup her bare flesh in my palm.

Her soft skin is still flushed from the warmth of her bath. Her breaths grow shakier as I palm and caress her lovely tits. She inhales sharply when I take her nipple between my fingers and squeeze.

I release the pressure and listen for her to exhale.

Relief.

It only lasts a second. I move my thumb over the hard little nub, then rub it in a rough circle. I move my thumb away and flick it, causing her to gasp.

Finally, she tries to push my hand away and roll farther away from me.

It doesn't work. I lock an arm around her waist and yank her back so hard, her ass comes flush against my hardening cock.

"Be a good girl," I warn her.

"Why?" she tosses back. "You're not a good man."

My lips curve up as I kiss the shell of her ear, replacing my hand on her tit. “True, but irrelevant.”

Struggling to break free from my embrace, she says, “I don’t want you touching me.”

Rolling her onto her stomach and holding her down as I lift the back of her robe and pry open her legs, I inform her, “I don’t care.”

It’s true in the moment. I want her to eventually warm up to me, but right now I’ve been without her for too long. I just want to feel her wet heat around my bare cock, no matter the cost.

She puts up a fight as I try to get my cock inside her, thrashing wildly as if it’s even possible for that to accomplish anything. All it does is make me rougher. I hold her face down against the pillow until she’s gasping for breath.

I grip a fistful of her hair like the horn of a saddle as I ease my cock into her tight, resisting heat. She groans with frustration, but my moan is all spine-tingling pleasure as I lose myself in her lovely body.

Once I’m buried inside her, some of the fight goes out of her. I don’t trust her to stop entirely given the mood she’s in tonight, so I let go of her hair and pull her wrists behind her back. I secure them with one hand so I can hold her hip with the other while I find a steady rhythm driving into her pussy.

She refuses to participate, but I don’t mind at all. The pleasure still builds and builds as I hold her thighs apart and thrust into her hot little body again and again. She tries to be as still as a corpse, but she breaks now and then to shove my hand away when I try to touch her clit and make it good for her, too.

Taking the hint, I stop trying to pleasure her and use her body brutally like the monster she accused me of being earlier tonight.

When I’m done with her and my cum is dripping from between her lovely thighs, she lays there on her stomach, dead silent. She tries to be, anyway. I hear her sniffle a couple of times and realize she might be crying.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“Like you care,” she says lowly.

“Of course I care,” I assure her, dragging her back against me and absently kissing the side of her head. “Broken toys are much less fun to play with.”

Not appreciating my taunt, she shoves at me and scoots away, curling up with her back to me at the edge of the bed.

I don’t like that at all, but just for tonight, I’ll give her some space.

Chapter Twenty Six

Hallie

The bedroom is dark even though it's morning. Calvin likes it that way, and even the sun can't seem to penetrate his iron will.

He blocks out all the light in the bedroom with blackout shades that he hasn't drawn yet, presumably because I'm still sleeping. I don't know what time it is. I only know it's daytime because bit of sunlight sneaks past the edges of the blinds. I don't know if Calvin's here or at work. I don't know what I'm supposed to do if I'm here alone, but I hope I am. I'll figure it out. I just don't want to see him.

At least I think I don't want to see him until I wash up and emerge from the bedroom in just the robe he bought me. I hear voices from the gallery. Curiosity compels me to pad down the hall and investigate.

Calvin stands there talking to two men in police uniforms.

My heart plummets. I don't know why. It's not as if I've done anything illegal, but Calvin definitely has.

Is that why they're here? Has he gone too far this time and it has actually caught up to him?

One of the officers glances in my direction and we lock eyes.

Calvin notices immediately and turns to look. "Sweetheart, there you are. I was just about to come wake you. These two officers need to speak with you."

Me?

Why would police officers come to Calvin's apartment looking for me?

I frown and slowly enter the gallery, the marble floor cool against my bare feet. “Oh?”

Calvin nods, holding my gaze. “I explained that you’re in the process of moving in so we’re living between two places at the moment.” He smiles like we’re a normal couple, then turns back to the officers.

“Yeah. Sorry to bother you, Miss,” says the tall, skinny one, ducking his head a bit. “Do you know Lance Matthews?”

“Yes.” My heart sinks into a vat of acid in my twisting stomach. “Is he all right?”

The officer nods. “He is. He’s in the hospital right now, but he said the two of you were accosted coming out of a restaurant last night and that the assailant took you with him.”

I swallow, unsure how to answer whatever questions they have for me. “Yes, that’s true. A man mugged us. He took the cash out of Lance’s wallet and then he demanded my purse.”

The officer nods, flipping open a little spiral notebook he’s carrying with him. “And did you give it to him?”

“What?”

He raises an expectant eyebrow. “The purse.”

“Oh. Um...” I pause to think. “No. No, he... He got distracted I think.”

“By what?”

“My dress.”

The officer cocks an eyebrow. “Was there something odd about it?”

I shake my head, tugging the robe closer to make sure more skin is covered. I’m keenly aware of my bare legs and I wish I could’ve put on some pants before doing this. “I think he made a comment about my breasts.”

“Oh,” the officer says, growing a bit flushed.

The other more aggressive-looking officer eyes me. “You *think* he made a comment about your breasts? You’re not sure?”

“I know he did, I just can’t remember now if it was in front of Lance or when he dragged me away.”

The nicer cop nods and jots that down in his notebook, but the hard-eyed one stares me down like he expects me to be a problem. “It would help us immensely if you would do your best to remember the details, ma’am.”

“Like I said, he made a comment. I’m not sure why that’s even relevant, honestly.”

“It is,” says the hardass, still holding my gaze. “We need every detail you can recall, even ones you don’t think are important.”

I dislike him immediately and intensely. Still trying to be conciliatory, I say, “All right. Well, now you know.”

“What did his voice sound like?”

My eyebrows rise. “Like a man? I don’t know how to describe a voice.”

“Deep? Low? High-pitched? Did he have an accent? Did he sound young or old?”

“I have no idea,” I answer.

Looking decidedly unimpressed, he says, “All right. What did he look like? We’ll need to note anything you can remember now, and if you could come down to the station later today, we can get more detail and have a sketch drawn to start circulating.”

I shake my head. “I can’t help with a sketch. I never saw his face. His hair. I have no idea what he looked like. He wore baggy jeans and a sweater—a hoodie. Underneath he wore a black ski mask, so even when the hood slipped down, I couldn’t see his face. I never even saw his eyes.”

“You can’t give us anything?” he asks skeptically.

I shrug helplessly. “He was taller than me, I think. But shorter than Lance.”

The nice one jots that down.

The jerky one asks, “Did you notice any distinguishing marks? Scars, tattoos?”

Arson’s inked hands flash to mind. “No,” I lie. “Not that I could see.”

I don’t know who Arson is, exactly, but without needing to be told, I can guess he isn’t someone you implicate in a staged mugging.

Officer Asshole is decidedly unimpressed. “So, he’s a man of average height. What about his build? Was he fat, thin, muscular?”

I shrug. “I don’t know... Regular?”

That’s not even remotely true. Arson is muscular and built like a fighter who throws one punch and knocks his opponent out.

I don’t say that, and I don’t even know why.

“A man of average height and build with no distinguishing features,” he says drolly.

I stare at him. “He was wearing a black ski mask.”

“Any jewelry? Did he wear a ring?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Could you tell what race he was?”

“I’d say Caucasian.”

“You’d say?”

“We didn’t have time to go over his family tree.”

The officer hikes an eyebrow. “There’s no need to be smart, Miss Meadows. You would think you’d want to do all you could to cooperate and help us find whoever attacked you and your *friend*.”

“And you would think you would talk to me like someone who was attacked instead of being so rude. I’m not going to talk with you. I’ll happily talk with him,” I say, pointing at the tall, skinnier one, “and tell him what I know, but I’m done talking to you.”

The man opens his mouth, but before he can speak, Calvin steps ahead of me. “I’m going to have to agree and ask you to leave.” He draws a business card out of his suit pocket. “This is our lawyer’s number. If you have any further questions, you can ask him. Hallie has been through enough, she doesn’t need you treating her so aggressively.”

The nicer officer jumps in. “I can finish up the interview.” Looking at his partner, he says, “Why don’t you go wait in the car and I’ll be right down?”

The mean officer’s pupils seem to double in size. His nostrils flare like a bull as he looks back at me, but then he glances at Calvin and clutches the lawyer’s card.

“Fine,” he says shortly.

We all wait for him to get in the elevator and go downstairs, then the remaining officer turns back to smile sheepishly. “Sorry about him,” he says. He’s a tall, gawky-looking guy with skin so pale he looks like he never leaves his house. “He can be a little intense.”

Once that guy is gone, things are much less stressful. Calvin invites Officer Davis in to sit at the table, and I recount a seriously edited version of what happened last night. I keep everything that happened in front of Lance accurate so our stories match, but obviously I can’t tell him what happened after that.

I get nervous when we get to that part, but this officer isn’t pushy. He steps gently around asking what happened after the assailant shoved me in the car, then tells me that DNA evidence could potentially lead them to the culprit.

The only DNA evidence they would get off me is Calvin’s. Which is fitting because he *is* the culprit in all of this.

Obviously, I can't say that.

I consider it for the faintest glimmer of a second. I know it would be a little tricky considering I was asleep at his apartment when the police arrived. It's not lost on me that if I tried to actually explain Calvin Cutler's role in my life and all the villainous shit he is currently responsible for doing, *I'm* the one who would come off sounding like an unhinged psycho.

In the end, I don't tell on Calvin. I know the opportunity sort of presented itself with cops literally showing up at his apartment when I have his DNA all over my body, but I haven't had time to think it through and I think doing it impulsively would be the wrong move. Once I open that box, I don't think it can be shut again, so if I'm going to open it, I need to be sure.

And he has all that crap on Charity.

I still can't believe that. Some part of me thinks maybe it isn't real, that somehow he fabricated all of it to use against me because surely Charity wouldn't do that to Tyler. Yeah, I saw her flirting with the bartender, but it was harmless.

I don't know how to ask, though. It's not like I can say, "Hey, by the way, I know this is a crazy question and I'm sorry, but some rich guy is trying to blackmail me into living with him with 'proof' that you cheated on Tyler the night before your wedding... That's crazy, right? That definitely didn't happen... right?"

Calvin proves an unlikely savior, stepping in when Officer Davis is waiting for me to offer up DNA evidence to help them catch their guy and telling him I've had a very rough night and he thinks I've been through enough today. Playing the concerned, supportive boyfriend, he pretends to check with me. I nod my agreement because I just want the cops to leave.

As he's walking the officer out, I overhear Calvin telling him that any DNA evidence there might have been is likely gone now, and that I don't wish to deal with that very private experience legally. Officer Davis advises against that, telling him we can always decide not to file charges, but if we

change our minds later and want to, this is the only time to collect the evidence. Of course, Calvin is immovable on the matter.

I'm sitting alone at the table when he walks back in. A soft blanket is wrapped around me like a cocoon, but it can't protect me from the icky grime of what I just overheard.

Calvin stops by the table and gazes down at me. "Are you all right?"

His tone is cool and detached though his words express polite concern. It doesn't feel fake like his performance in front of the cops, more a routine question he reminds himself to ask me. I don't think he's accustomed to checking on the wellbeing of others.

"I guess," I answer, because honestly I'm not sure how I feel. "You realize you implied to the cop just now that I was raped last night after I was hauled out of that alley?"

The expression on his face doesn't change, but he reaches a hand toward me and casually caresses my cheek. "Weren't you?"

My jaw falls open as I stare up at him, appalled at how casually he says that.

He drops his hand and walks around the counter. "I don't typically have a prepared breakfast, so I don't have Chef Ryan coming today, but going forward I can ask that he stop over and prepare us breakfast if you'd like. I can even have him prepare lunches for you like he did at your place so you don't have to worry about that and you can focus on your work or Marie or whatever else you'd rather spend your time on."

"How can you just... say that so flippantly?"

He looks back at me, a frown creasing his brow. "Scheduling Chef Ryan isn't a big deal, Hallie. It only makes sense to outsource tasks like that so you can spend your time on more important things. You don't see me working the mail room at my company, do you? Of course not. That would be a waste of my talents."

“Not that.” I shake my head, marveling at how he could possibly not know what I was referring to. He just casually mentioned raping me last night, and the man thinks I’m in awe about him hiring a chef to make breakfast?

His confusion is so sincere, though, I decide not to bother along that tack. It’s odd, but *he’s* odd, so I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. “All right. Full disclosure, Chef Ryan probably thinks I’m a ho now. He overheard me talking to Charity about the date she was fixing me up on and I was all, ‘I’m totally not his girlfriend,’ but now that I’m your captive or whatever, he’s just... he’s not going to believe me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he states.

“You don’t care if he thinks your girlfriend is a trifling ho-bag and you’re being made a fool of?”

“No,” he says simply. “Unless there’s a reason to, perhaps a business merger or something of that nature, I never concern myself with what other people think of me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t care,” he answers simply. Opening the refrigerator, he takes out a pitcher and grabs a spotless glass from the cupboard. “Hollis is on his way to keep an eye on you today. It won’t always be like that, but this is obviously new and I can’t trust you yet.”

I think it’s funny that *he’s* the one who thinks he can’t trust *me*.

He places the crystal glass of orange juice down in front of me. As a matter of habit, I thank him.

I feel a pinch of annoyance immediately after the fact, but it’s not as if I can reel the words back in.

He smiles faintly without looking at me as he grabs a second glass and pours a glass for himself. It’s not nearly as full as mine. It’s as if he’s used to pouring alcohol, so he measures it out the same way. “So polite.”

“Yes, well, some of us are taught to have manners.” It’s a stupid snipe, but I’m mad at him about so many things and I just want to lash out about *something*.

He deflects my blow easily, turning back to look at me as he takes a slow sip of orange juice. “I know. That’s why you’re so easy to take advantage of.”

My spine stiffens at the barbed comment and my chest seems to contract the tiniest bit.

Before I can summon a response, Calvin says, “Let’s not do this, hm? We can jab at each other all day, but I’ll win, and that certainly won’t endear me to you.”

“You think anything can at this point?” I ask in mild disbelief.

“I do.”

I shake my head. “You’re insane.”

“Perhaps.” He doesn’t seem all that concerned as he throws back the juice like it’s whiskey, then sets the empty glass on the counter. He turns his wrist just slightly and checks his watch. “I have to leave now, unfortunately. I’ll be home for dinner.” Looking back at me with a knowing smile, he adds, “Try not to miss me too much.”

Yeah, right.

I watch as he approaches the hall leading to the gallery and the elevator.

Is he really going to leave me here alone before Hollis shows up?

I think he is.

My heart rate picks up a little, and my mind starts to race.

I could run.

Of course I could run, but my ability to run or not isn’t what keeps me trapped here. Yes, he had that file folder in his office, but even if he left the

whole packet out on the desk instead of locked away, I'm sure he has copies. He said Arson had a copy of all of it, and I haven't known him to be a liar.

“Hallie.”

His voice startles me. I already thought of him as gone, so I look back over my shoulder with a look I hope isn't too guilty. “Yeah?”

His lips tug up and a touch of real fondness glints in his eyes. “I'm happy you're here.”

It's the most absurd thing in the world to feel a pinch of guilt that I was contemplating escape just a moment before he said that, but I remind myself my feelings are appropriate; his are not.

I don't know how the hell I'll get away from this lunatic. I can't run, so I have to find another way. I need to make him tired of me fast.

An idea occurs to me. A fun one, but at the same time the very notion of doing it horrifies me.

My smile comes much easier as I offer one back. “Thank you,” I say, almost sweetly.

He should find that suspicious. The look he gives me tells me perhaps he does, but he doesn't have time to stay and investigate.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Hallie

It has been a long day. A fun day. Much more fun than I expected.

I kneel on the floor of Calvin's formerly spotless living room trying not to feel too nervous. I know he's on his way home because Hollis told me, but Chef Ryan isn't here yet. I was sort of hoping he would be in case Calvin walks in and gets legitimately angry.

I'm wearing a pair of work leggings and one of Calvin's shirts, no bra underneath. My hair is messy and pulled up so it's out of my face while I work.

I'm certain the Persian rug covering the living room floor was quite expensive because everything in Calvin's house is expensive. Currently, I'm using it as a mess mat. Several pages of the children's book I'm working on are laid out across the rug. I painted the backgrounds with watercolors and cut out the snowman, cabin, and tree to glue down on top. But it's a winter story and it's supposed to be snowing in most of the panels, so I have one final touch before they're finished.

Beside me left thigh is a bowl full of watered down white tempera paint. I have an assortment of brushes for flicking and splattering the loose paint so it looks like fluffy snowflakes on my pictures.

If I were doing this at home, I would have used a splatter box to contain the mess.

Because I'm trying to be the biggest nuisance I possibly can be to make Calvin decide to rehome me in my own apartment, I am not. In fact, I made sure to set myself up right behind his indubitably expensive couch, ensuring maximum paint flickage on the lush material.

I feel guilty doing it. Not to him, but to the couch. Poor couch. You didn't ask to be dragged into this.

I hear the elevator doors open.

He's home.

My heart leaps, but I double down. I've already ruined the rug. Now it's the couch's turn.

I'm sorry, couch.

I take a deep breath, then like a child set loose with its first paint set, I begin flicking white paint all over the pictures—and the rugs, and the couch. Some even makes it off the rug and hits the floor.

It's more stressful than fun, and it's not even my own home I'm trashing.

I feel horrible, but I pretend not to. I flick and splatter my way across the pictures in front of me, then I scoot over and begin on the next ones.

Hollis stands with his hands clasped in front of him, the way I imagine a secret service agent might when they're standing guard over the president. He looks over as Calvin enters the room, then immediately looks back at me.

I flash Calvin the brightest smile, holding up my paint brush. "You're home."

His gaze rakes over me in his pricey dress shirt, now splattered and dyed with various shades of paint. I watch his eyes register the damage to the rug, and as he walks around the couch, he notices that, too.

As he gets closer to me, my heart begins to race, but I try not to let it show. I don't want him to know he's making me nervous. He's not even trying to, I just feel like a child who knows I've misbehaved and now I'll surely be punished.

And with him, I'm not sure what that punishment might be.

He says nothing about the mess I've made. His gaze flickers to the pages I illustrated, spaced out across his rug. "Lovely."

I blink. "Oh. You think so?"

"Mm-hmm. I like your color choices. The snow is a perfect finishing touch." He leans down to kiss me on the cheek. "I like you wearing my shirt, too. I see you *did* miss me today. Needed my scent all over your body." He caresses my cheek, looking more amused than annoyed. "Don't worry, sweetheart. You'll get plenty of it later."

I blink up at him, confused. He's not even mad.

Rats.

I know he saw the paint I flicked all over the place, but just in case he missed it—the paint is white, like the couch, so maybe he didn't notice that.

"I got paint everywhere. I hope you don't mind. I'm quite messy when I'm working."

He smiles faintly. "Not at all, my love. We can turn one of the spare bedrooms into your studio if you'd like."

Goddammit, why isn't he mad?

I scowl up at him and he smiles back, then he turns away and walks into his office with his briefcase.

I'm still sitting on my legs holding a paintbrush and pouting when he comes back in.

"Chef Ryan will be here soon," Calvin says, flicking a glance at my outfit, his gaze lingering on the swatch of skin exposed below my neck. "You should finish what you're working on so you can clean yourself up before dinner."

"I ruined the couch," I state, still clinging to the idea that perhaps he doesn't realize the extent of the damage. "The rug, too. This won't wash out."

“Yes,” he says dryly. “Your creative way of telling me you’d like to remodel has been noted. It’s your home now, too; if you don’t like the furnishings, just tell me and we’ll pick something out together.”

Well, that didn’t go to plan at all.

Sighing, I give up on annoying him and finish splattering my pages. Once I’m finished, I gather up all my paint supplies, wash out my brushes, and move my pictures to the long dining table we didn’t use before so they can dry.

Marie wakes up from her nap while I’m doing that and notices Calvin is home. She eyes him up, then prances right over and rubs up against his leg.

“Hey, girl,” he says, leaning down to pet her.

She purrs and pushes her head against his hand.

“Traitor,” I mutter.

“I’ll get Marie dinner while you shower and clean up for dinner,” Calvin says.

“What are we having tonight? Another five course meal, I presume?”

“Tonight we’re having vegetable tempura for an appetizer, then chicken teriyaki and teriyaki beef short ribs—two separate courses.”

“Of course.”

“Ryan will make enough chicken so he can prepare you a spicy chicken bowl for lunch tomorrow. Then for dessert, we’ll have a dish of mango ice cream.”

My mouth waters just hearing that menu. “That all sounds amazing.”

“Glad you think so.”

I turn, startled, at the sound of Chef Ryan’s voice. He flashes me a faint smile and heads to the kitchen with his totes full of supplies. “Oh, hello,” I say a bit shyly. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

It's ridiculous to feel sheepish in his presence. *I* know I didn't do anything wrong, but he doesn't, and the idea that he thinks I'm some faithless person rankles. Maybe Calvin doesn't care what he thinks, but I do.

In a subtle attempt to show him things are not all rainbows and unicorns in spoiled, rich man's girlfriend land like he probably thinks, I turn to Calvin right in front of him and ask, "May I have my phone back, please?"

Calvin glances up from petting my faithless kitty. "Why?"

"Because I haven't had access to it all day while you were gone, and I would like to check my missed messages and work emails. You said I could do my work while I was locked up here all day, but I don't have my laptop, so without my phone, there are things I was unable to do."

He regards me for a moment, an inscrutable look on his face that makes my tummy sink. It clears a second later and he offers a bland smile. "Of course. Hollis will get it for you."

By the time I'm finished working and catching up on all the messages I missed, Chef Ryan is nearly finished with our appetizer and there's no time to shower. I head to the bathroom to wash up and change into the dinner dress Calvin left draped across the bed, but I can't help noticing he forgot to give me panties.

I'm tempted to go into his walk-in closet and see if I can find a stash of clothing meant for me and grab them myself.

I'm one step inside the closet when I'm besieged by the scent of him, the overwhelmingly masculine energy of his clothing and accessories hung up and neatly organized. I had to come in this closet earlier to grab one of

his dress shirts to paint in, but I zipped in and right back out. Being in here, I felt like he would catch me even though I knew he wasn't home.

I don't linger now, either.

I give up on the search for panties without giving it much effort. I grab the outfit he set out for me and look it over.

It's a stylish metallic gray mini dress. I'm not sure how comfortable it will be, but when I run my hand along the interior fabric, it's nice and soft. When I pull it on, it clings to my body and hits toward the top of my thigh.

I don't mind wearing short, sexy dresses, but the lack of underwear presents a problem with a dress this length.

Calvin is seated at the smaller table when I come back out. He asks how my day was, but I don't politely ask the same in return. I agonize over my silence, but despite my goal of infuriating him today not working even a little bit, I know the only way out of here is for him to get bored of me.

A dinner companion who won't speak to him can't be much fun. I would up the rudeness quotient and mess around on my phone while we eat, but he took it back after I finished catching up.

He tries a few more times to talk to me. He asks what the book I'm illustrating is about, how long I have to complete it, if I'll dive right into the next project or if I take time off in between.

I don't answer any of his questions.

My stony silence only ends when I finally meet his gaze and ask, "Do you know how Lance is doing?"

His face doesn't register surprise—or anything else, for that matter. As if he's never heard the name before, he asks levelly, "Who?"

"My date. Lance Matthews. The man who was shot last night."

Calvin smiles, but it's not a nice smile. He places his fork down and looks across the table at me. "Do you think it's wise to keep trying to

provoke me, Hallie?”

No.

I don't say that. I look down at my plate as I spear one of the last pieces of chicken and swirl it in the remaining teriyaki sauce. “I'm only forced to be here. I never said anything about being pleasant. If you'd like pleasant company for dinner, I would suggest inviting a woman who *wants* to be here with you. You're well aware I don't.”

He shakes his head faintly. “Oh, I'll have pleasant company. And it will be exactly the woman I desire. You're the only one who will suffer if you choose to be a brat. I'll have fun either way.”

I wait, silent, hoping he will say more. A pit of dread opens in my stomach at the notion of *suffering* at his hands, particularly given what I know about his appetites.

“What does that mean?” I finally ask, after letting my mind wander for a few moments.

This time, he gets to give me the silent treatment.

Mine didn't seem to faze him, but his is agonizing. As he sits there not saying another word throughout dinner, I consider all the different ways he could punish me. Not just sexually, either. I suppose if I don't play his game the way he wants me to, he has already proven he's not hesitant to hurt people in other ways. He compiled a dossier on my best friend's sins. He shot a man I barely even know because he took me out on a date.

I'm not playing on fair ground, here.

It's not remotely fair to make me play nice, but I suppose none of this is fair.

“Can we come up with some rules of civility?” I request.

He glances at me but doesn't answer, so I go on.

“It just seems like maybe we should have rules, that way we both understand what's expected of us and where the limits are.”

“I had a man shot, Hallie. There are no limits.”

My horrified gaze shoots to Chef Ryan, but the man is dishing out ice cream, unfazed by whatever he may or may not have just overheard.

Noticing my gaze, Calvin says, “He’s worked for worse men than me, Hallie. Stop waiting for him to be horrified. It’s not going to happen.”

He’s used my name twice in about a minute, leaving me with the impression I might be annoying him.

I know I set out to annoy him today, but a wave of emotion rolls over me and I start to wonder if that was the best idea.

“Look, I don’t know how to do this, okay? I don’t know how to be... whatever I am to you. I just need a few rules so I know nobody else will get hurt. The only assurance I have is that you won’t kill me or irreparably... mark me,” I say, for lack of better terminology. “That you’ll let me leave at the end of this. But that’s not enough. I told you before I need some kind of assurance of safety, not just for me, but for the people around me. I didn’t think to stipulate that before, but you told me you’d never...” Even though he said Chef Ryan won’t be fazed, I glance at him before altering what I was about to say. “Dirtied your own hands with certain tasks, and I think perhaps I took that more literally than you meant it. I didn’t think you meant you just hadn’t dirtied your own hands, I thought you meant you hadn’t done that sort of thing at all.”

Calvin shakes his head faintly, spearing a piece of meat. “I didn’t say that,” he says before popping it into his mouth.

I stare at him. “Didn’t say what? That you’d never killed anyone?”

“No. I never said I wouldn’t irreparably mark you. I said I wouldn’t *harm* you so badly that you were incapable of leaving, and I said I wouldn’t physically *injure* you beyond repair. I said nothing about not leaving my mark. I can’t make a promise like that. I could let you go right this instant and I would have already marked you, Hallie. You could walk out the door tonight and never see me again, but you’ll still carry me with you for the rest of your life.”

My chest feels hollow as he utters the unutterable. It's indecent, completely fucking depraved to acknowledge a thing like that.

Unfortunately, I know it's also the truth.

When a vicious storm finally passes through, its path isn't left clear. You have to deal with all the wreckage left in its wake. And even after the arduous work of cleaning up and repairing everything you thought was damaged, you'll find tiny fragments of debris and things that are still broken long after you've convinced yourself you've put it all behind you.

The storm may end, but life can never return to what it was before it hit.

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Chapter Twenty Eight

Hallie

He doesn't give me any panties to wear to bed.

Tonight there's not even a robe. The one I wore last night is gone, probably taken to the wash, but I don't have any of my own things at his penthouse, so I have nothing to replace it.

I lingered in the shower longer than I needed to. Every inch of me is dry now, but I still cling to the fluffy white bath towel.

I'm just delaying the inevitable.

Outside this bathroom, he waits for me.

I don't know that for certain, of course. I haven't opened the door to check, but I know it in my bones.

Perhaps the safety I feel in this locked bathroom is artificial; it's his home, I suppose he probably has a key if he really wanted to get in.

He doesn't have to come and get me, though. I'm prey caught in his trap. He knows I have nowhere to run.

In every regard.

Shaking off thoughts I don't have time to process right now, I finally decide to stop stalling. I comb my fingers through the damp strands of my honey-toned hair one last time and turn toward the door, my bath towel still wrapped around me.

I can smell the fragrance of the luxury bath wash he bought for me lingering on my skin. It smells incredible, like a big bouquet of lush flowers. The shampoo and conditioner were the same brand—something

fancy and French with gold calligraphy on the label—so my hair smells just as good.

I would rather climb into his bed smelling like a dirty, sweaty mess so he'd be less inclined to touch me, but I suppose he already thought of that and that's why he gave me all the accoutrements I would need to smell amazing.

I bite back the urge to grumble about falling right into his trap, but deep down, I know it wouldn't matter if I smelled lovely or not. If he wanted me, he'd take me either way.

And the man clearly wants me.

He's gone to frankly psychotic lengths to have me. If I weren't so depressed about it, I might feel flattered.

It's not forever.

That's what I have to keep telling myself.

It's only until he grows bored of me, and how long can a rich, spoiled ass like him really stay focused on a single woman? If men like that enjoyed commitment, they wouldn't all be on their third and fourth wives.

I wonder why Calvin has never been married.

I almost think to ask, then I realize I already know the answer: because he's a lunatic and no sane woman would marry him.

I smile faintly thinking it, but it's not really true. There are plenty of women who would marry him for all sorts of reasons—physically, he's exceptionally attractive. Money never hurts. I suppose if you looked at things in a different light, his psychotic devotion might seem... romantic, in a really twisted kind of way.

I remind myself he's not devoted to me. I'm a fixation, that's all. Land he hasn't yet conquered.

He'll get bored of me and move on. They all do.

The bedroom light is off when I crack open the bathroom door, so I make the mistake of thinking Calvin hasn't come to bed yet.

My heart leaps when the light hits the massive bed and I see him sitting on the edge of it. My side of the bed.

He has taken off his suit jacket and rolled the sleeves of his white dress shirt up to just below his elbows. I've always found it sexy when a man wore his sleeves rolled up like that. I resist the urge to look at Calvin's arms. I know what they look like. I've seen the definition in his corded muscles as he strained to wrestle me into submission, glimpsed his tanned, sexy hand and arm veins when he was grabbing my arms to pin them behind my back so he could have his way with me.

His tie is off now and the top button of his shirt is unbuttoned. He looks more relaxed than he did at dinner, and relaxed is a nice look on him. I don't know why, but I would bet he doesn't let many people see him in this state.

His gaze lingers on me as I cautiously step into the room.

Shyness creeps up on me and I think of how naked I am beneath this towel.

My voice is small, but it breaks the silence. "May I have some clothes to sleep in?"

He braces his palms on the bed behind him and leans back, his gaze never leaving me. "Manners?"

"Please," I add, managing to keep my tone sweet despite a faint surge of irritation.

Calvin smiles. He knows I'm annoyed but trying to shove it down for him. He likes that. "No," he says anyway. "I'm afraid brats don't get clothes."

I can't deny I've been a brat today. I think I have my reasons, but I don't bother arguing in my own defense. Even though I'm a little afraid to, I ask, "What do brats get?"

“Punishment.”

I suck in a breath at the cool steel in his tone. At the word itself. I may have been a bit combative at dinner, but I’m not in the mood to fight with him anymore today. “Even—even if I’m sorry?” I ask tentatively.

“Are you?” he asks, not bothering to mask the interest in his voice.

I swallow down the feeling that I’m betraying myself with my answer and nod. I just want to go to sleep. I want this day to be over. At least when I wake up, I know he won’t be here.

He sits forward, bracing his hands on his spread thighs. “All right. Then I’ll allow you to choose.”

My brow creases with confusion. “Choose?”

“Your punishment,” he specifies.

It’s only when he nods to the corner that I notice the piece of equipment set up there. It’s horrific. A beam of metal erected at the center of an ebony-colored, solid wood base. There’s a layer of red leather padding, and restraints behind the beam. Most horrifying of all, in front of the beam a thick silver dildo is attached to some kind of shaft.

“What is that?” I whisper, hearing the tremor in my own voice.

“Door number one.”

“It looks like a torture device.”

“It can be,” he says casually, gazing at the monstrosity. “If you choose this option, I won’t fuck your pussy tonight. It will. You will get on your knees, naked. I will strap you into the restraints and smear some lube inside your pussy as a kindness. If you hadn’t apologized, I wouldn’t have bothered. I’d have let you feel every bit of the brutality as the impaling machine pushed inside your dry little cunt before you were ready. You’d strain with all your might to get away from the intrusion, but you’re on your knees. There’s only so far you can go.” He holds up a little black remote. “And see, I control that intrusion. So when you’re stretching away from it

and retreating as far as you're physically able, I make it thrust higher. Faster. Harder. I let the machine brutalize that sweet pussy until you're crying and whimpering and begging for it to stop, begging *me* for mercy, and my cock is rock hard because I'm the one doing it to you. And then, my sweet Hallie... then I fuck your face while my machine abuses your pussy, and I keep doing it until my cum pours down your throat and your pussy is so sore you can't sit down, and then in the morning I wake you up with my cock, because I *love* to fuck a battered pussy. So much easier to make you whimper and whine and beg me to stop."

My knuckles are white from how tightly I'm holding onto the towel. My face might be, too, and my stomach feels sick.

Not that. Whatever door number two is, I want that instead.

When I can trust my mouth to open without bile coming up, I finally ask, "And my other option?"

"A spanking," he says simply.

My heart lightens. "That's all?"

"And whatever else that leads to, of course. But your second option is much less brutal, all things considered. You unlocked that one when you chose to stop being a brat. See? Good things happen to you when you behave."

It's hysterical that he thinks this constitutes a good thing happening to me, but I'm desperate to avoid that impaling pole and the horrifying scene he described, so I don't say that.

Swallowing past the lump stuck in my throat, I ask softly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Which do you choose—me, or the machine?"

I hate the way he phrases that, as if I have any choice at all. "You." I swallow again, the self-betrayal cutting even deeper. "I choose you."

I can see from the glint of victory in his eyes that those words seal my fate, but who am I kidding? My fate was already sealed. It was sealed before I slipped into his office and grabbed one of his shirts to paint in, before I ruined the rug or the couch. It was sealed before I ever even agreed to any of his concessions, back when I first saw Jackson's name flash across the screen and answered the call.

I should have ignored that damn call.

Too late now.

"Drop the towel."

My grip on it tightens, but I override the impulse and force myself to open it, revealing my bare body for his viewing pleasure. My flesh warms as his gaze moves down my body. He lingers on the most obvious places, of course, but he takes his time admiring every inch.

"Come closer."

There's a huskiness to his voice that sends a nervous thrill shooting through my tummy. I drop the towel. I hear it hit the floor as I take a slow step forward.

"Touch yourself," he commands.

My heart thuds. "Where?"

Rather than answer, he takes my hands and places them over my boobs. Taking the hint, I grab the soft mounds of flesh, kneading and squeezing while he watches.

It only lasts a moment, then he grabs my hip and forces me closer. I drop my hands, unsure what to do next.

"I didn't say stop," he says.

"Oh." I palm my breasts again, squeezing them together and watching his face so I can pay closer attention to what he likes.

He has both hands on my hips now, but his touch is light. I'm planted between his thighs while I play with my boobs. As he watches, his fingertips lightly skim my sides on their way up. He pushes one of my hands away, covering one with his much larger hand. He's rougher with my nipple than I was, and before I can draw a breath, it's erect, begging for his attention as his thumb passes over it roughly, back and forth, back and forth.

I can feel it everywhere. Roots of pleasure start at the peak of my breast where he's toying with me, but travel down to my pussy, which is now throbbing shamelessly.

My eyes flutter closed as he pushes my other hand away and does the same thing with that breast. I try to keep my breathing shallow so he doesn't realize how aroused my body is already, but it's difficult.

"You don't have to hide from me, Hallie."

My eyes pop open. For a split second, I wonder if somehow my thoughts slipped out of my mouth, but no. There was silence in the room aside from the rustling of his clothing and the sounds of my uneven breathing.

Shifting my gaze from his face down to his thighs, I say, "I don't know what you mean. I'm right here."

His lips tug up faintly. "Such a pretty little liar." With that, he squeezes my nipples so hard I cry out from the shocking bite of pain when everything he'd done prior had felt so good, then he releases them, and I think that disappoints my body most of all. Dropping the open palm of his hand against his thigh, he says, "Sit."

My eyes widened and dart back to his face. "Sit?"

"On my lap," he says patiently.

I thought he was going to spank me.

I don't see how he'll do that with my butt on his lap, but I decide not to question him. I don't want to annoy him and end up strapped to that fucking

machine.

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Chapter Twenty Nine

Hallie

Calvin sits on the edge of the bed, waiting for me to do as he commanded.

My face heats as I gingerly lower myself onto his lap. I've never sat on a grown man's lap before—not as an adult, anyway. My Santa Claus days are long behind me, and this is certainly not as innocent as that.

I feel awkward about my weight on his knee. Lap sitting isn't for full-grown women, it's for—

My thoughts are cut off abruptly when he slides his hand around my bare waist and pulls me closer. Heat from his body joins the rising heat in mine and I'm so warm, I'm almost relieved to be naked.

I sat tentatively with my butt on one thigh, but my feet still on the floor. He's not content with that, and he drapes my legs over his so I'm completely off the floor, every bit of my weight supported by him.

I feel intensely vulnerable in this position. *Achingly* vulnerable. I want to ask him to stop, but he's not even doing anything. His hard, muscular body feels so reliable. His strong arm is wrapped around my back, supporting me.

“Kiss me,” he says, and I do. It feels perfectly natural in this position. I drape an arm around his neck so I can lean into him and close my eyes as his mouth effortlessly dominates mine. My pussy tingles even though he isn't touching it and I can feel myself getting wet.

He only kisses me for a moment, then he breaks away, leaving my lips a little swollen and me feeling strangely bereft.

Something inside tells me to resist, that none of this is happening by accident, even though it feels that way to me. That he's in complete control, and he knows the results he will get from every move he makes.

That should make me feel more guarded, but in some ways... it's reassuring.

His tone is gentle, but firm. "Rub."

I don't have to ask where he wants me to rub him. I slide my hand down to cover the massive bulge in his black slacks. His eyes drift closed and his head falls back, but his firm grip on my body never eases.

"That's enough."

I stop, and he opens his eyes. I can feel his gaze searching mine. I'm not sure what he's looking for, but I can feel how unguarded I am, how insistently some part of me is offering up every scrap of my soul she can hold in her hands for him to riffle through.

Some sick part buried deep inside of me wants to please him, and I don't understand why.

That makes it easier when he finally repositions me and tells me to lean forward. I brace one hand on the mattress and one on his knee as he repositions my body so it's draped across his lap.

I thought I would feel stiff and uncomfortable, but I don't. My breasts are smashed against his muscular thigh. I can feel his cock prodding my hipbone through the fabric of his pants, and my ass is draped across his other knee.

I feel soft and malleable, like clay in a pair of very capable hands. I tell myself I shouldn't trust him, but the sexual side of me is completely closed to advice at the moment.

"Now," he says, his voice commanding and comforting at the same time. He runs a hand over my ass, and languidness pours over me, causing my eyes to drift closed for a second. "I want you to understand that if you continue to provoke me, my punishments will grow in severity. A spanking

is very mild, but I know little about the extent of your sexual experience, and I don't want to hurl you into the deep end if you're accustomed to having floaties on your arms."

That's nice of him.

There's an alarming lack of sarcasm in that thought so I try to shake it off.

No. No, nothing about him is nice.

So kind.

It's like the sexual part of me is actively trying to bait the sensible side of me, preening and gazing at him with open adoration.

Ridiculous.

Just because he knows how to sexually excite me does not mean—

His hand lands on my ass again, still softly, and a sigh of pleasure escapes me.

Oh, that feels nice.

I swallow as his hand passes lightly over my ass again, but this time, a daring finger traces the slit between my legs and I sigh at the tingle of pleasure. His touch is light and made of magic. He rubs my ass again, his finger tracing the opening of my pussy, his touch even lighter this time. It sends shivers up my spine.

"You want it in your pussy, don't you, sweetheart?"

Yes.

No. No, no, no.

I try to insist I don't, but that part of me is growing fainter as his feather light touch teases my pussy. He does it again and again until I'm squirming on his lap, barely able to resist the urge to shift so that my pussy rubs against his thigh. I'm desperate for the friction. I want to feel good.

He raises his hand. I wait to feel him caress me again, but instead he brings his hand down hard and slaps my ass. The contact startles me more than the force. He was being so light and gentle, my body wasn't prepared for the impact. Before I have a chance to recover, he smacks me again, harder this time.

My skin stings, but inexplicably, my pussy is still tingling.

His hand returns to my ass, but his touch is lighter again, smoothing over the stinging flesh. I was tense when he was hitting me, but I relax as he rubs and massages my ass like he was before. The sting fades and pleasure resurfaces as he pushes a finger between my legs again, teasing my pussy.

Pleasure dances up my spine. His hand is gone again.

Then it's back, bringing searing heat as he smacks my ass again, harder than the first two times.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

"Calvin," I cry after the third, wiggling to try to get away from the increasing burn. "That's too hard."

His voice isn't gentle at all when he tells me, "I say when it's too hard." His grip on me tightens and he smacks my ass again, this strike even more violent than the ones before it.

"No," I cry, wiggling and throwing my body until I'm falling off his lap. He tries to hold onto me, but I kick him away and fall to the floor with a thud.

My heart seizes, then begins to thump wildly in my chest. I can't wait for him to react, so I try to crawl away.

I'm afraid of what he'll do. Did I break the rule? He said he would spank me, but the strikes were getting too hard and I was afraid.

I hear the bed squeak as he stands. Hear the *thwip* as he draws off his belt. I'm terrified he's going to hit me with it, so I crawl frantically toward

the bedroom door, but it's a pointless instinct; I don't really have anywhere to run.

He bends down and catches my ankles, jerking them out from under me and causing me to fall flat on my stomach. I scramble to get up, to keep crawling away, but he grabs a fistful of my hair and drags me up by it.

I cry out at the pain, not fighting him because I don't want him to pull any harder.

"I'm sorry," falls out of my mouth, but he doesn't seem to care. Stony silence is all he gives me and I can't see him to see the expression on his face. "I'm sorry," I cry again as he drags me across the floor toward the bed. I scurry to catch my weight on my hands and knees, to crawl in the same direction to lessen the searing pain radiating from my scalp.

He stops in front of the bed, but we're still on the floor. He pushes me down on my stomach, and that's when I hear him unzip his pants. I hear the fabric rustle as he drags them down and kicks them off, and then his fingers are digging into my hips and he's lifting my ass, and before I can even catch up, I'm smashed against the floor, my ass raised, and his cock inside me. My pussy is wet so he doesn't have to force his way this time. My body welcomes him, locking around him tightly as if it never wants him to leave.

I do not feel the same way, but right now as he drives his cock inside me again and again, each thrust more forceful than the last, I'm just glad he's not hitting me.

He only fucks me on the floor for a minute or two before he pulls out. I swallow, trying to shift my position to keep from banging up my knees too bad.

"Get up."

My heart jumps, but I'm quick to obey. I raise my gaze to his cautiously to find him pointing at the mattress.

"Bend over the bed."

I do as he says, grateful that at least this time my hands are braced on silk soft bed sheets and a comfortable, pillow-top mattress.

Calvin grabs my hips to position me, then he grabs my ass and spreads my cheeks.

My stomach drops.

“What would you say if I wanted to put my cock up your ass tonight, sweetheart?”

Oh God, no.

I hesitate.

“Have you ever had a cock in your ass?” he asks.

“No,” I answer quietly.

“Mm.” He runs his hand over the smarting flesh, then spreads my cheeks again and grabs his cock. “But I can, right?”

I want to scream no, that he should leave at least some part of me untouched by him.

I close my eyes and swallow. I’m miserable at the thought of how much it’s going to hurt, but something tells me he’ll make it hurt worse if I tell him no.

“Yes,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

“What was that?”

I can’t believe he’s making me say it again. “Yes. You can... take my ass if you want to.”

This time, his voice registers surprise. “How accommodating. What a good girl you are.”

I expect pain to follow my acquiescence, but instead of his cock in my ass, he plunges a finger into my needy pussy.

Excitement grips me as his finger moves methodically, straight to my clit. He doesn't waste time exploring anywhere else, he zeroes right in on the most sensitive spot and has me gasping and clutching desperately at the bed in mere moments.

His voice is like heaven as he leans over me and murmurs in my ear, "Bad girls get punishments, but what do good girls get?"

The finger banging of their life, if his current actions are any indication. I can't answer; I'm too busy seeing stars as he rubs my pussy with just the right amount of roughness.

"Oh, God," I breathe.

Pleasure erupts within and a sharp cry bursts free from my throat. As the dizzying pleasure of release washes over me, Calvin yanks his fingers out and shoves his cock into me.

I don't care. Bliss surrounds me even as he pounds into my body. When he drags me forward and climbs on the bed behind me, I gladly sink to my forearms with my ass in the air and do my best to stay where he put me throughout every brutal thrust.

Because I came so fast, I guess I expected him to be close, but he's not. He fucks me in waves as he intermittently drags off pieces of clothing. By the time he's finally naked, I'm face down in the mattress. His fingers dig into my hips a bit painfully and he drives into me like he's trying to split me in half. I'm so hot and thirsty, I could pass out. My muscles are jelly from going through so many different positions.

My pussy has had about all it can take. I'm ready to beg him to stop, to let me suck him to finish him off. It feels like we've been in this bed for hours, and my body can't take much more.

"Calvin, please," I cry tiredly.

He slows down, then pulls his cock out of me. "Are you tired, baby?"

I nod miserably.

He rolls me over onto my back, pushing my thighs apart so he can climb between them.

I don't fight. I'm exhausted.

He must be in better shape than I am, because he's not. He looms over me with his cock out, allowing me a moment to catch my breath. I gaze up at him, struck by the beauty of him completely naked. He looks leaner in his suits, but his core is solid with perfectly chiseled muscles. His pecs are well-shaped and firm. I get to put my hands on them as he leans down over me.

He caresses the side of my face and just looks at me. Then he pushes his fingers through my hair and cradles the back of my head, pulling me up so that I'm in a sitting position, but cradled against his broad chest.

"It's almost over, baby," he promises.

My body arches as he reaches down and eases his cock back inside me. It doesn't hurt anymore, but I bet it will tomorrow. I've never encountered the kind of stamina he's showing tonight, so my body very literally was not ready.

He cradles me against his chest, and I wrap my arms around him. My hands rest on his muscular back as he drives into me once more. I'm not participating, just letting him use my body for his own gratification.

When his grip on me tightens and I feel his core going taut, I know he's close. I bear down a bit and squeeze my tired muscles, clenching around his cock.

The friction startles me. I thought my pussy was too tired to keep going, but I gasp at the sensation as he rubs my walls. He lets go of me and I fall back against the bed, my heart rate kicking up from the split second of free fall.

Still slamming into me at a regular rhythm, he repositions himself and braces one hand against the bed to support his weight. He reaches for my pussy with the other one, teasing my clit as he fucks me.

I moan helplessly as my legs begin to shake. I don't have to concentrate on gripping him anymore. My pussy tightens naturally around his cock as he rubs my clit and continues to fuck me.

It's like he grabbed hold of all my nerves in a tight fist and won't let go. Tension builds impossibly fast until I'm gasping for breath and arching off the bed. My thighs begin to quiver, ecstasy just out of reach. I cry out, I whimper, I beg mindlessly.

And then I scream as I fly over the edge and free fall again, but this time... this time the freefall is so sweet. It thunders through me, shaking me to my core. It hits in waves, seeming to come from completely different paces. My pussy clenches tightly around his cock and Calvin groans, violently gripping the bed as he drives as deep into me as he can.

I feel like I've just gone down the fun side part of a roller coaster and barely made it out alive. My tummy flutters as he collapses on top of me. I'm weak and blissed out, and I wrap my arms around his incredible body without even thinking about it.

His weight on top of me feels nice. My body is so relaxed that when my eyes close, I nearly drift off.

I can't fall asleep like this, spread across the middle of the bed with Calvin's cock still inside me. I move just enough for him to jostle, too, and when he does, he tugs his cock out of me.

"I need to get up," I murmur, pushing lightly against his chest.

He rolls off me and I roll off the bed. Instinctively, I start to grab for clothes, but then I remember I don't have any.

I suppose there's no point clinging to modesty. He's seen every part of me by now, so I walk to the bathroom naked.

Chapter Thirty

Hallie

My muscles are still a bit shaky and fatigued as I lean against the sink, greedily gulping tap water from the crystal glass provided for me to use when I brush my teeth.

I feel better once I'm hydrated again, but my whole body is still sticky from being so sweaty.

So much for my shower before bed.

I don't smell like expensive French body wash anymore. I smell like Calvin. He's all over me, inside me...

Once the glass is empty, I replace it on the sink and go to pee and clean myself up.

When I return to the bedroom, Calvin has settled in beneath the blanket. I thought he looked relaxed before, but I was wrong. He looked in control before; *now* he looks relaxed.

I pull back the blanket so I can crawl under it, but I'm unsure what to do. I was more actively involved in this sexual encounter than the last one, but only to avoid a worse alternative. I'm not sure what's supposed to happen after an encounter like that.

Mercifully, I don't have to figure it out. He reaches over and grabs me, then tugs me across the bed until I'm wrapped in his arms.

I'm not supposed to like that, but it feels nice. I feel safe, which is absurd, but given the precariousness of my situation, I'm in no position to turn down the feeling of safety, even if it's only an illusion.

There are things that need to be discussed, though, and this feels like as good a time as any. “So... you’re into BDSM, then?”

He glances down at me, his dark eyebrows rising in surprise. “No. Why would you think that?”

My eyes widen. “Um, I don’t know. Maybe the big, scary BDSM torture machine in the corner?”

Calvin shakes his head. “I’ve dabbled, but the lifestyle doesn’t really do it for me. The cornerstones of BDSM are ‘safe, sane, and consensual.’ Does any of that sound like me?”

A frown flickers across my face. “No, I guess not.” My frown lingers, but the concern his position nurtures has roots, and I know they’ll grow deeper and deeper if I don’t address it now. I feel around for the right words. I’m not sure I find them, but I start asking the question and hope I’ll find my way. “What do you hope to get out of this relationship?”

“What do you mean?”

“What am I to you? Or, what do you want me to be? You’re calling the shots, right? So it’s up to you, but I need to be looped in. I tried to touch on this earlier, but I was being a brat, so we didn’t get anywhere. When I was asking about the rules and limits. It was a real question, I was just mad, so I wasn’t approaching it in a level-headed, communicative way. But I do need to know exactly what it is you want out of this, because... I mean, that’s the only way I can adjust my own behavior and expectations accordingly.”

He’s following me, which isn’t surprising. The man is a lunatic, but all signs indicate he must also be intelligent. “All right. What specifically are you asking?”

I feel like an absolute idiot asking *are we dating?* like I’m a hair-twirling high school girl, but I need to know. “I’m yours as long as I have to be. I get that. But what does that *mean* exactly? Am I your prisoner? Your girlfriend?”

“Why not both?” he jokes.

At least, I *think* he's joking.

"You're not free to leave," he says, "so in the strictest sense, I suppose you're my prisoner. If you choose to think of it that way, I can't imagine you'll be very happy. If you'd rather be happy, then consider yourself my girlfriend."

"But girlfriends are free to leave."

"Then you're my girlfriend, asterisk."

I crack a smile. "Your girlfriend, asterisk?"

He shrugs. "It's the best I've got for you."

"All right. What sort of rights and freedoms does an asterisked girlfriend have? Will I ever get my phone back?"

"Yes, when I decide you're ready to have it back."

That's annoying, but I'm picking my battles tonight. "I don't understand why I'm not allowed to have it. I need it for work. I need it to talk to my friends and family. There's this stupid mobile game I like to play and you are *seriously* threatening my daily login streak. These are my imperative reasons for having a phone. It's not like I'm going to call for help. You're blackmailing me, that's the whole point. And what would I even say? 'Help, help, a gorgeous rich guy is holding me against my will in his beautiful penthouse where a private chef cooks all my meals and I'm free to work if I want to and snuggle my cat all day long!' No one would believe me."

Calvin smirks. "I'm not worried about that."

"Then what's the deal?"

"I have my reasons," he says vaguely, but doesn't bother to elaborate on what those reasons are. "Anything else, or is your phone all you're worried about?"

"Well, my login streak. Obviously, it's a valid concern."

He smiles. “Of course, a very big deal. I’ll make sure you get your phone at least once a day so you don’t lose it.”

He knows I’m not *really* that concerned about a mobile game, but the levity feels nice for a moment considering this is actually quite a heavy conversation. “All right. I also need to know you won’t hurt anybody else. Lance and I had a terrible date, if you want to know the truth. He reminded me why dating was exhausting and disappointing and just... not much fun at all. But he didn’t deserve to be shot, and if you were mad at me for going out with him—even *though you had no right to be*—you should have taken that up with me. It should have been a discussion or something, not a bullet pumped into that poor man’s body.”

“I make no apologies for what happened that night,” he states, calm, but immovable. “I warned you not to go on the date, and you disobeyed me.”

My eyes widen. “I didn’t know the stakes! If you had communicated them to me, then I wouldn’t have gone.”

“Well, I’m communicating them to you now. You’re mine, and I don’t share. If it crosses your mind to go out with another man again, it should follow logically that I’m going to take retribution on the sorry fucker.”

I manage to keep my aggravation reined in, but just barely. “We *weren’t dating*.”

“We *are* now.”

I sigh. “Fine. I’m obviously not going to go out with anybody else right now, while I am... tied to you,” I say, for lack of better word. “But I didn’t then, either. I did what I said I would. You and I were over as far as I was concerned.”

“Obviously, you were incorrect.”

I meet his gaze dead-eyed, but I don’t swallow the bait. “I need to know you won’t do it again.”

“I promise not to do it again without warning you—explicitly—first. There. How’s that?”

I narrow my eyes at him, not altogether satisfied, but I suppose that’s good enough. “All right. I guess that will have to do.”

“Mm-hmm. Anything else?”

“Um... exclusivity. We’ve covered the need for mine, but not yours.”

I’m tentative to bring this up, knowing I don’t have any real currency to barter with. He’s put me in a corner with the stuff he has on Charity. This isn’t a normal situation where I have the option of leaving or saying no, and that makes me pretty powerless in this whole relationship. He can do whatever he wants, apparently, but there are practical things to consider. The man will not put a condom on his dick, so if he’s shoving it in other women when he’s not with me... well, I have a problem with that.

“Exclusivity isn’t an issue,” he says. “I wouldn’t go to all this trouble if I wanted to fuck anyone else, Hallie.”

His words are reassuring, but not good enough. “This ‘relationship’ is very uncomfortable for me the way you’ve set it up. It’s highly untraditional. You have all the power and I have none. If I have dinner with a male friend and you don’t like it, you might shoot him. What can I do if you do something I don’t like? Nothing, because you’ve taken every bit of the power for yourself.”

“I understand that,” he says. “I’m not an easy man to be with, Hallie. There’s a reason I had to resort to blackmail to get you here.”

“I realize that, but the way things are now, it’s very unfair to me. Does that matter to you? Or are you fine with being unfair to me as long as it means you get what you want out of the arrangement?”

His brow furrows. “Of course that matters to me. I’m not above bullying you to get you where I want you, obviously, but now that you’re there I’d prefer that you’re happy.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do to make it feel less... high-risk for me?”

“I’m not sure it’s what I can do, but what *you* can do.”

My eyebrows rise. “Me?”

“You have to trust me. You call our type of relationship untraditional, and I suppose it is, but it’s not unheard of. I have friends who *are* involved in the BDSM scene who have relationships exactly like that. They work because their partners trust them to take care of their needs.”

“I knew you were into BDSM,” I mutter under my breath.

“I’m not, they are.”

“Right. You’re not, you just like to have BDSM style relationships, sex, and—*oh, yeah*—the torture machine in the corner. But yeah, you’re right. Definitely not into BDSM.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not. I told you I’ve dabbled. The club we met at is a common playground for people who enjoy the lifestyle, but it wasn’t enough for me. I did that for a while because it was the closest to a satisfying experience I could get, but even that grew dull. That’s why you’re here. In BDSM, the sub is the one who truly has all the power. Because of those rules—safe, sane, and consensual—she would be the one with the ultimate power in the relationship. That’s not what I want.”

“You want a prisoner.”

I swear, the man almost says yes, but he stops short, probably realizing that is not a socially acceptable thing to admit.

“You can tell the truth,” I tell him, shrugging one shoulder.

He regards me carefully, but I suppose because I’m calm and blasé about it, he feels comfortable admitting it. “I want someone who can’t leave.”

I nod slowly. I’m sensing some deep-seated abandonment issues. “Do you realize that by not giving someone the ability to leave, you’re also

stripping away their ability to choose you?”

A frown flickers across his face as if perhaps he hadn't considered that, but it eases after a moment and he smiles a very faint, self-deprecating smile. “Once they know the real me, who would, anyway?”

My heart contracts with sympathy. Stupid, stupid sympathy. I'm certain he doesn't deserve it after the things he's done to me, but his words put a knot in my stomach. Even though I know he doesn't deserve it, I hug him. Because I want to, and I understand. Everyone wants to feel chosen, and I can certainly see why he makes that absolutely impossible. There are plenty of ways he's appealing, but plenty more ways he's extremely problematic. He stands in his own way. His baggage is heavier and more difficult than most, but mine's a lot lighter, and I suppose I haven't found that, either.

“My first boyfriend, I loved him with everything I had and then some. I was 17 and he was my first love, but I wasn't his. He was a nightmare, honestly. Even calling him a boyfriend was a joke, he just used me over and over again because I let him. I think some part of me knew it even then. I may have played the fool, but I wasn't one. And no matter how much I gave, it was never enough. He was a black hole, sucking up every bit of my energy and my happiness, but never giving anything back, and a sane girl would have gotten fed up with that. She would've left.”

“You didn't.”

I shake my head. “Nope. Stayed until he'd sucked me completely dry. He left me for someone else.” I glance up at him. “Not one of my proudest moments.”

He shrugs lightly, not judging me for my youthful mistakes.

“And you'd think it would have been a relief. He sucked so much out of me, it probably saved my life that he finally cut me loose. I'm not even exaggerating. Loving him sent me into some really dark places, and I went to even darker places afterward because...” I swallow, unsure how deep into this I want to get. “Worse things happened in my quest to obliterate that pain. But I wasn't relieved. I didn't want to be set free. I wanted to spend

the rest of my life in that dysfunctional prison with him.” I look up and meet his gaze. “Why would anyone ever want a thing like that? But I was convinced I could never love anyone else. It was him or nothing. There was no love for me if it wasn’t his, which was all the more ridiculous because he obviously never loved me.”

“He sounds like an idiot.”

I crack a tiny smile. “Yeah. He was. But so was I. It’s an unkind thing to say about myself, but I couldn’t have been more wrong about pretty much everything. Maybe I haven’t found what I’m looking for yet, but I’ve built a nice life for myself. A life I never could have had with him. A better life than his, too. I shouldn’t admit this, but I tend to check out ghosts from my past on social media to see how their lives turned out. His is bad. He knocked up that girl he left me for and they’ve had this ridiculous on-again-off-again relationship, the kind where you could see either of them impulsively pulling a loaded gun and killing the other at any given time. Just drama and dysfunction and toxicity. I guess he didn’t outgrow it. But I did, thankfully. I won’t say I’ve always made the best relationship decisions, but I’ve never let anyone treat me that way again even though I really hate to lose people. I’m not one of those easy breezy people capable of effortlessly letting go. Even Jackson, I never loved him, but he was still able to... lure me into that situation,” I say, looking down, since it’s too sordid to look at his face when I’m talking about that night.

Calvin grabs my jaw and forces me to look back at him. “You have a good heart. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It makes me dumb sometimes,” I say lightly, turning my head to break his grip.

He allows it, but I still feel his gaze on me when I look away. “What worse things happened?”

My blood freezes, and my stomach does a somersault. “Hm?”

“You said worse things happened when you tried to distract yourself from the heartbreak. You went to darker places.”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” I say honestly. “I’m tired, aren’t you?”

His lips tug up faintly. “All right, you obviously don’t want to talk about that.”

“I’m just tired,” I state, pulling away from him since he’s a human space heater. Or maybe it was the memory, I don’t know.

He allows me to move over into the spot next to his, but I don’t move far. I stay closer to the middle of the king sized bed than over on my own side. “What do *you* want?”

I roll on my side and slide my arm up under the cool underside of the pillow so I can get ready for sleep. “In general, or...?”

“When you were talking about the first boyfriend, you said you haven’t found what you’re looking for yet. What are you looking for?”

It’s a hard question. I know the answer, but I don’t want to read off unchecked boxes from some imaginary list. “I want to be loved, completely. I want someone as committed to me as I am to them. I want a man who truly knows who he is, what he wants. I don’t want to build a life that’s going to fall apart, so I need someone who knows what he’s doing, who will build along with me and be just as invested in the success of our joint venture as I am.”

He regards me with a look I might consider fondness if I didn’t know the story of our relationship. “That seems pretty reasonable.”

“You’d think. Everyone wants to fuck around and have easy, shallow relationships that they bail out of as soon as the excitement fades. Nobody wants to dig deep and really invest in a single person.”

“That’s not true,” he says. “Look how much I’ve invested in you already, and I intend to invest much more.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sorry, I should have been more specific. I want all that from a man who isn’t a rapey blackmailer who is effectively holding me prisoner.”

“Ah.” He nods as if that makes sense. “See, that’s where you went wrong. You told the universe what you wanted, but you weren’t specific enough. Now you’re stuck with me.”

I crack a smile. “Only until you get bored.”

His dark gaze moves over my face, then lowers to my bare breasts and the shape of my body beneath the blanket. “If I were you, I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for that to happen.”

I’m not sure he’s being sincere, but given the open end date on this arrangement, it does raise questions.

While I’m trapped here in this twisted fairy tale with him, my real life is on hold. If he grows bored with me in a month or two, that’s not so long. It will be a crazy memory of an odd departure from real life, a time of handsome villains in New York City dungeons and a risqué private tour of the Met. At the end of the day, a better memory than most women get of men like him who force themselves onto the pages of our stories.

But what if it takes a lot longer for him to grow weary of me?

What if this break from reality is less of a debauched vacation and more of a total relocation?

It would be so easy to lose myself to him. He’s forceful and I’m not. Beneath the surface I think he’s lonely, and I’ve always had more empathy than a person probably needs. While he’s not a liar, he is very willing to manipulate circumstances. If he sees that chink in my armor and chooses to use it against me...

I don’t know what will happen.

I know I’ve only been caught in his trap for a little over 24 hours, and I voluntarily gave him a hug tonight.

I know I’ve never been excellent at keeping my heart to myself once someone has access to my body.

I know I haven't *given* him access to my body, but he's taken it anyway.

Over a prolonged period of time, how will that affect me?

That, I don't know.

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Chapter Thirty One

Hallie

I barely wake up the next morning when Calvin does.

I'm face-down, hugging my pillow. It's his weight on me that wakes me up, then I feel him between my legs and realize they're spread. Before I can move or make a noise, he's inside me. My body aches from being used so roughly last night, so I don't make it harder on myself by fighting. I clutch the pillow as he drives into me, hard and unrelenting. I try to ignore the pressure that begins to build in my own body, a natural result of his cock roughly moving in and out, scraping my pussy walls. It aches because I'm sore, but it doesn't hurt because of dryness, so I think he may have used lube this time.

He growls and grabs a fistful of my hair, pushing my face into the pillow as he comes. I struggle on instinct because I can't breathe. He lets go and grabs my arm, rolling me over on my back so I have to look up at him. He looks down at my angry face as he pins me down, his cock hanging against my thigh, and smiles.

"Good morning."

I do not return the sentiment.

He doesn't seem to care. He leans in and kisses my forehead as if I did, then he releases me and climbs off the bed.

I try to keep my gaze from drifting to his sculpted ass, but I fail. At least I look away before he catches me.

"Ryan was already booked for this morning, but he'll be here to make you breakfast tomorrow."

I jerk my blanket back over myself rather violently. "Already booked?"

“I share his services with one other person. Prior to having you here, I didn’t need him every day, so it didn’t make sense to have him full-time.”

“Thought you didn’t share,” I mutter, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the wetness between my legs as I try to get comfortable so I can go back to sleep.

“I don’t share you,” Calvin specifies. “A chef I can share.”

I grumble incoherently and try to relax, but it’s impossible knowing he’s still in the room.

Mercifully, he heads for the shower, so I’m able to fall back asleep.

—

When I’m ready to wake up for the day, I do so slowly.

I have to take another shower since Calvin is such a greedy man and dirtied me up. Much to my relief, I find a pair of my own pajamas waiting for me on the bathroom counter. Calvin must have stuff from my apartment stashed somewhere because the pink and gray *Aristocats* pajamas are definitely the ones my sister bought me for Christmas last year. She bought us matching ones and we took a picture in them together with Marie snuggled up on the couch between us.

Since I work from home most of the time, I’m no stranger to wearing PJs all day. It’s the most like myself I’ve felt at Calvin’s as I head to the kitchen, pausing to pet Marie who rubs up against my legs.

“Mommy will feed you right now,” I tell her. “Assuming your new boyfriend Calvin didn’t already do it.”

She flounces her tail as she ignores that comment and sashays into the kitchen.

I smile faintly and follow her.

Once Marie is fed and I'm fixing myself some instant oatmeal, I hear the elevator doors open in the gallery. I freeze, not sure what to expect, but it's Hollis who comes around the corner.

"Good morning, Hollis."

"Morning," he returns, nodding his head.

I see he's carrying a garment bag draped over his back and a rectangular box tucked under his arm. "Did you bring me presents?"

He nods, walking over and pulling a black envelope from Calvin out of his interior suit pocket.

I stop stirring and put the spoon down so I can grab it and open it.

Hallie,

I'm taking you to dinner and a show tonight.

The show starts at 7, so be ready to leave at 4:30.

Have a good day.

-Calvin

That's kind of sweet.

I frown at my own thought. Is it?

I don't know, but I do enjoy going to the theater. I assume the gifts Hollis brought are what Calvin wants me to wear.

I take the lid off the rectangular box and find a stunning pair of red and black leopard-print pumps from Dolce & Gabbana. "Wow. These are stunning."

Hollis nods his agreement. "Very pretty."

"Will you be coming to the show with us?"

"I'll drive you. I won't be going in." He hands me a small shopping bag with satin strings and tissue paper inside that I didn't notice him carrying under the box.

I open it to find a pair of pantyhose and a scrap of material I guess Calvin considers underwear. I hold them up by the strings and look at the scant piece of black lace that will cover my crotch. "A thong. How comfortable."

Hollis turns to cover his smirk. He unzips the dress bag and holds it up so I can do the rest.

I have to get pretty close to him to pull the dress out of the bag. I catch the scent of his cologne and off-handedly tell him, "You smell good."

His eyes widen like I just punched him in the abdomen and he cannot believe my audacity. "Don't say shit like that."

I blink. "What?"

He shakes his head, glancing around like Calvin's home and he'll overhear it. I've never seen Hollis look antsy before, but he does now.

"It was just a casual compliment. Relax," I tell him. He's being squirrely as hell, but I ignore it and tug the dress off the hanger.

It's a beautiful, classic little black dress with an asymmetrical neckline. It'll look great with the shoes he bought me, and I'm glad it's a sheath that won't blow up if there's a gust of wind since the panties will not provide much coverage.

"These are so pretty," I say, going back over to look at the shoes. "I'm excited to wear them." Actually, I'm too excited to wait. I might look silly wearing them around the house, but there's no one but Hollis around to see.

I don't want to wear them barefoot, so I take my new pantyhose to the master bathroom as well and change into them.

Once I get them on, I don't want to put my adorable *Aristocats* pajamas on. These pumps make me feel sexy, so instead of putting them on, I go to Calvin's closet and steal another of his snowy white dress shirts. He has plenty of them, so I doubt he'll mind. I slip it on and drape it strategically, then I finger comb my hair and shake it out to give it a little more body.

Satisfied that I look sexy enough, I head back out to the living room with a smile on my face.

Hollis turns when I enter the room, then his eyes widen. He takes a step back as I walk toward him, looking as if I'm some kind of threat.

What is his problem?

"Can you take a picture of me?"

"Absolutely not," he answers.

I scowl. "Why? I want to taunt Calvin. I want to send him a sexed up picture and tell him maybe if he'd let me have my phone during the day, he'd get more like it."

Hollis still looks decidedly uncomfortable.

"Come on," I say, waving for him to follow me as I head to Calvin's office. "We'll need to take a few. Let's start in here, then the bedroom, maybe even the master bath, depending on your photography skills."

Hollis doesn't look very excited about helping me take sexy pictures, but I want my phone back, dammit. Besides, it's not like it will make a difference. Calvin will maul me tonight whether I send him pictures or I don't. Maybe if I can convince him he would benefit from it, he'll decide to give my phone back sooner rather than later.

My plan kind of works, anyway. Hollis doesn't want the pictures on his phone, so he unlocks the drawer in Calvin's office where mine is kept and takes it out for the photo shoot. While he has it out, I tell him I "have to make sure I have enough storage" so he gives it to me and I'm able to quickly shoot off a text to Charity, who is hounding me about taking forever

to answer her texts, and even check a work email and shoot back a quick response.

“Are you done?” Hollis asks, scowling at me.

“Almost! Two more screenshots to delete. I take screenshots of the dumbest things and then I forget to delete them.” I can tell he’s skeptical about my story, so to distract him while I email my boss, I ask, “Do you have a jealous girlfriend or something?”

“No.” He still scowls at me. “Why?”

“You’re just being really weird about the photo shoot. I thought maybe you had a girlfriend you didn’t want to risk finding racy photos of me in your recently deleted photos. It’s not like you would keep them, just send them to Calvin for me.”

Hollis shakes his head. “I’d rather not.” Holding his hand out, he says, “I know you’re done with whatever you’re doing over there. Give me the phone.”

I rush to end the email and push send, then I close my apps and open up the camera. “There. All ready.”

It has been quite some time since I’ve taken sexy pictures to send a guy, but it’s incredibly easy to feel sexy in these heels. I lay draped across his desk with one leg bent, my heel resting gently on the smooth mahogany surface. We take a couple of shots of me in Calvin’s chair.

We move to the bedroom and take quite a few of me in bed. Hollis begins to sweat when I unbutton another button and drape the shirt strategically to expose a bit of cleavage.

As I’m moving from one pose to another of me climbing on the bed and looking back at the camera, I say, “We have fresh strawberries in the refrigerator. Why don’t I grab one before we move to the bathroom. I have an idea of a shot, me lying in the bathtub with the shirt completely unbuttoned—but strategically placed, of course—and me biting into a strawberry. It looks really sexy in my mind, let’s try it.”

It's not until we're in the bathroom and I have the strawberry in my hand that Hollis finally asks, "Do you think sending sexy pictures to a guy who has already blackmailed you is the best idea?"

"When you put it that way, no. But these pictures are tasteful, they're nothing I would die of embarrassment about if they got out."

"Fine. As long as you realize there's every chance he'll use them against you."

"It's a calculated risk. I need my phone back, and this seems like one potential way to get it. I haven't come up with any others yet."

Despite his reluctance, Hollis helps me take the last shots, then he gives my phone back so I can go through them and decide which ones to send to Calvin. I'm glad because it also gives me a chance to text Charity back a couple of times.

In the end, I choose four pictures and attach them in a text to Calvin.

Hollis gives me a minute to wait for a response, but when nothing comes through, he begins to get antsy. Another twenty seconds or so pass and then he says, "All right, hand it over."

"He hasn't texted back yet."

"He might not. You're not even supposed to have your phone. He probably expects I've taken it away by now. And now I'm going to," he says, right as he snatches it.

"Hey!" I pout. "But how will I know if he likes them?"

He shoots me a look. "You know he'll like them."

"Do you like them?" I tease.

He points at me, dead-eyed. "Stop."

My eyes narrow with suspicion. "Why are you being so weird?"

"I'm not being weird. You're coming onto me, and I don't know why. If you think I'll help you, I won't. If you're trying to piss off Calvin, find

another way.”

“Is it because you’re afraid he’ll shoot you?” I ask gravely.

He is not amused.

“If it helps, he promised not to do that again without warning me first so I can stop him.”

“I wouldn’t let that reassurance get you too comfortable. If you get yourself into a situation where he has to give you that warning, I imagine the cost to get out of it will be pretty damn high.”

“You know I’m not seriously hitting on you, right?” I ask seriously, despite my smile. “I just thought it was weird how you reacted to that compliment and now it’s kind of fun to mess with you. If Calvin doesn’t want me flirting with you to entertain myself, maybe he should give me my phone back so I can play my mobile game instead.”

Hollis shakes his head. “You’re going to get both of our asses beat, and I don’t like it nearly as much as you must to be provoking him like this.”

“He’s not here,” I point out.

But Hollis has been acting like he is, and that’s another reason I keep messing with him—one I won’t share.

Hollis knows much more about what Calvin is up to than I do, and while I wouldn’t normally expect such a thing, Calvin isn’t normal, *and* he surely isn’t clueless about technology since he owns a tech company. If Hollis is behaving like Calvin is watching over us, that might mean there’s a nanny cam or something in the apartment so Calvin can keep an eye on me while he’s at work.

He spoke freely in the master bathroom, so it probably isn’t in there. Calvin’s living room and kitchen are open floorplan and the office is right off the kitchen, so it stands to reason if there is one, it’s probably out here somewhere.

It reminds me of the time I had to go to a convention for work and I couldn't take Marie, so I had to have her boarded for the weekend. The reason I went with the place I went with was because the room she would be kept in came equipped with a camera so I could check in on her whenever I wanted to see what she was up to.

He's treating me like a pet.

I glance down at the pretty heels I'm still wearing.

A well-kept pet, granted.

But still a pet.

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Chapter Thirty Two

Hallie

Hollis doesn't stay all day. I get some work done after he leaves, but since I have to be ready to go by 4:30, I don't get as much done as I would like to.

My hands are a bit achy by then anyway, so I do a few stretches and make a mental note to ask Calvin for my yoga mat so I can get back to my routine of regularly doing yoga in the mornings before work. Once I'm finished with that, I give Marie some cuddles and play with her a bit since I'll be out all evening, then I go to get dressed and put my pretty new heels back on.

I love the way I look in this outfit and that makes me feel really good, too. Rationally, I know I shouldn't be okay with going out with a man who wants a captive girlfriend and who had a man shot just the other night, but I guess knowing I have no other option makes it easier to swallow.

I can be miserable about going tonight, or I can make the best of it. I choose to make the best of it.

Hollis comes back when it's time to get me. I wait upstairs for him instead of meeting him downstairs. When he asks why, I tell him, "I need my phone."

Of course, he tells me I'm not allowed to have the phone, but after a couple of minutes of bickering about it, he grabs "the damn thing" and slides it in his jacket pocket.

"There, are you happy?" he asks as we finally step inside the elevator.

I flash him a smile. "Very."

I expect Calvin to be in the car, but when Hollis lets me in, I'm alone. He tells me Calvin had to finish up work and he'll meet me at the restaurant.

Hollis pulls up to the curb and shoots off a quick text as he walks around the car. When he opens the door for me, he tells me to go on in; Calvin is waiting.

The icy hostess seems annoyed with me for existing, but I give her Calvin's name and tell her he's waiting for me. She grabs two menus and wordlessly makes her way through the busy steakhouse with me right on her heels. I expect her to lead me to an empty table down here, but instead she walks me over to a winding staircase with red carpet cascading down the shiny onyx steps. The doorway is roped off, but she unlatches the red velvet barrier and lets me pass before securing it again behind us.

Nothing explicitly says it's a VIP area, but it must be.

I suppose I should have expected Calvin would reserve a table in the VIP section.

As soon as we step into the upper dining room, everything feels more relaxed. There are fewer tables up here, more spaced out to allow for more privacy. She leads me to a booth in the corner where Calvin is already seated and looking at his phone with one hand wrapped around a glass of amber liquid. He looks up when he registers movement coming toward him. His gaze lands on me and he smiles, looking me over briefly before meeting my gaze.

He looks genuinely happy to see me.

He also immediately puts his phone away so he can give me his undivided attention.

I smile back.

It might be simple politeness, especially since we have a frosty hostess for an audience. But it might also be because it's so drastically different from dates like the one I went on with Lance where the guy can hardly be bothered to ask a question about me.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Calvin says standing, and leaning in to kiss me. “How was your day?”

My insides feel warmer than they should. “Good,” I answer as I slide into the seat across from his.

The hostess passes us each a menu, then walks away to retrieve a pitcher of water. There are two empty goblets on the table. She fills them, then tells us our server’s name is Celeste and she will be over with our appetizer in just a moment.

I don’t know if the “hello sweetheart” was also because we had an audience or he really meant it, but I feel a bit bashful, like I really am on a date. I don’t know what to do or say, and I don’t know why I feel so awkward.

“How was your day?” I ask, since he asked how mine was.

“Fine. I wasn’t as productive as I meant to be.”

“No? Neither was I.”

His lips quirk. “Oh, I’d say *you* were pretty productive.” His gaze warms and hints at mischief. “It’s your fault I didn’t get much done.”

“Was I running through your mind all day?” I joke.

“Yes,” he says, not joking.

“Oh.” I look down, adjusting the napkin on my lap. Looking back up, I ignore the blush I can feel starting on my cheeks. “Is it because I sent you racy pictures?”

“That’s why I didn’t get anything done,” he says, amused. “I’m glad you liked the shoes. I’ll take thank yous like that as often as you want to send them.”

“I love the shoes,” I say, leaning back so I can look at them under the table. *Still pretty.* I smile faintly at them, then look back at Calvin and my smile ebbs. “I didn’t send them as a thank you, though.”

“No?” he returns as a matter of routine, but I can tell by the look on his face he already knows exactly why I sent them.

I shake my head. “No. I need my phone back. And see, you like when I *have* my phone. We both win if you just let me have it.”

The corners of his lips lift a bit, but his gaze drops. I feel like he’s displeased that I’m asking for my phone back, and I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal. “Do you remember what I said about how much I enjoy when you try to manipulate and control the situation?”

I press my lips together in feigned consideration. “I believe it was something like, ‘only I’m allowed to do that.’”

He nods. “So you do remember.”

“I do. Do *you* remember how I mentioned this relationship has a power imbalance that’s really uncomfortable for me? Demands like that only deepen the divide.”

Something I’ve said clicks, I see it in his eyes. His faint irritation is wiped away, replaced with a sort of patience, like I’m a child not understanding a simple lesson. “This shouldn’t be comfortable, Hallie. Not right now. It’s brand-new, a dynamic you’re totally unfamiliar with. Of course you’re not comfortable right now. Stop expecting to be. Do it even though you’re not comfortable. I am not a comfortable man, but I believe you can adjust to me. You can *become* very comfortable, but only if you stop resisting and trying to control everything. I won’t let you, so until you do, we’ll be locked in a power struggle that won’t be much fun for either of us. You have to let go and trust me.”

Trust is an obscene thing for him to demand from me after all he’s done. “You want trust you haven’t earned, Calvin. Trust is built over time, I can’t just give it to you.”

“Yes, you can,” he disagrees. “Give it to me on a contingent basis for now if you have to, however you have to convince yourself to give in and give it a try. Trust is built by watching your partner come through for you again and again. Consistently seeing them prioritize you and make the right

choices. I understand things began with us in a..." He pauses to look for the word. "Less than ideal way, but we're in this now, and it's a separate thing. You weren't my girlfriend that night, you were a stranger. I will still use you whenever and however I please, but now that you're mine, I assure you, you can trust me to take very good care of you."

"It wasn't just that night, Calvin. You blackmailed me," I remind him, before glancing around to make sure no one overheard.

"To get you into the relationship," he says calmly, as if that was a completely fair thing to do. "Now you're in it. If you *behave* like a woman in a relationship instead of a prisoner with one eye glued to the door, I won't need to blackmail you any further."

I fold my arms over my chest and stare at him. "But do you hear yourself? It's still an option if I don't fall into line."

"Absolutely," he says, unflinchingly holding my gaze. "Understand this, sweetheart." That's a twisted endearment to use considering his next words. "You're mine no matter what. I'm the winning team. Whether I'm a one-man team or a two-person team, whichever team I am on will be the one that wins. Period. End of story. If you fight me, you will lose. I guarantee it. I will set your whole entire world on fire. I will scorch the earth around anyone you even somewhat love. I will ruin your life, and you and all of your loved ones will spend *years* clawing your way out of the graves I dig for you."

My jaw hangs open, the horror on my face plain to see.

"But," he goes on, still in that same calm tone, "that's not what I want. I don't want to hurt you. I like you. I want you on my team."

"Oh. Lucky me," I say faintly, not understanding how he can say all of this as if it's healthy or normal.

"It is lucky," he says, not a bit ironically. "Who doesn't want to be on the winning team?"

I swallow. "Maybe someone who doesn't have a choice about joining."

“You do,” he says simply. “You have to be in this relationship, but you don’t have to be happy in it. That’s where you get to choose. If you’d rather be my prisoner than my girlfriend, you’re free to. I can hire a morally-flexible bodyguard to watch you every second of every day for the rest of your life, if that’s what you want.”

My face tells him how much I don’t want that, so I don’t offer any words.

He goes on. “I can make you do a lot of things, Hallie, but I can’t make you yield your power. That’s a different thing from me taking it from you.” He regards me, his gaze serious. “Giving in is the only thing you have to do, and then we can *both* be happy. I’ll take it from there, and I’ll take good care of you. You can count on that.”

It’s scary what he’s asking. I can’t wrap my mind around it. Trusting him seems like sheer lunacy. I could try to fake it, but to actually *do* it?

I’d have to be as crazy as he is.

“I know I’m asking a lot,” he says when I don’t answer after a few seconds.

My gaze shifts to him. “Do you?”

He nods. “But I’ll make it worth your while. I’m not asking you to sacrifice yourself for me, Hallie. You’ll benefit from the arrangement, too. I will take care of you completely. I will give you everything you could ever dream to have—but you’ll get it on *my* terms, not yours.”

My lips curve up faintly, but I feel no amusement. I don’t look at him as I say, “You’ll give me the world, or you’ll burn mine to the ground? How can both things be true?”

Unapologetic, he shrugs. He takes the linen napkin off his side of the table and unfolds it. “I told you before and I’ll tell you again. I’ll do whatever it takes to get what I want, and you are what I want.” He spreads the napkin across his lap, then looks back at me across the table. “In the bedroom and out of it, I can give you pleasure, or I can take it away. The choice is yours, Hallie. Choose wisely.”

Calvin orders my dinner, and then he orders dessert.

It feels like I'm being tested in some way. He told me he wanted me to relinquish control to him, but I don't think I entirely understood the scale of it.

I'm starting to think his only reason for not letting me have my phone is that I keep asking for it. Originally, I thought he was worried I would appeal to someone for help. I think I've had his motives and concerns confused, so I've been trying to solve this problem in ways that will never work with him.

I resolve to spend the rest of the night trying to do things his way. I don't want to be his prisoner. I don't want to be his girlfriend, either, but if those are my only two options, one is clearly preferable to the other.

So, I ignore the notion that it's mental and start treating him like I would a boyfriend I picked out for myself.

I thank him for dinner after he pays because I like when a first date doesn't ask me to chip in. I know this isn't actually our first date, but I'm treating it like it is.

When we exit the restaurant and stop on the sidewalk, I reach over and take his hand.

His gaze darts to me, almost startled. He didn't expect that.

I smile.

He won't expect this, either.

Then I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

I don't always kiss on the first date and I *never* initiate, but on a typical first date, there's no chance in hell he would have already been inside me

multiple times, either.

This isn't a typical anything, so I throw out the rulebook and navigate the whole night by instinct alone.

Once Calvin recovers from his surprise, he slides his arm around my waist and locks me against his body. A jolt of excitement shoots through me at the rough way he grabs me, then blossoms into warmth when his free hand comes up to caress my face.

He looks happy when he gazes down at me, and I really like knowing it's a direct result of my actions.

I want things to keep going well, so I swallow nervously before I speak. I'm so unsure in these waters, I don't know if my next words will rock the boat or not. "Can we walk to the theater? It's not far from here, and I love walking through the city. With traffic, it would probably take just as long in the car."

I watch his face carefully and pay close attention to his hands on my body to see if there's any shift to indicate displeasure. There's not, so I guess maybe that was okay.

Then he eliminates any hint of doubt when he says, "Of course. I'll just text Hollis to let him know."

Chapter Thirty Three

Hallie

I feel strangely accomplished and can't hold back a smile as Calvin pulls out his phone to text Hollis.

I got my way, and all I had to do was ask sweetly. I file that information away for later, but I'm not sure I even need to. I'm acting on instinct, so if my instincts are leading me in the right direction, maybe the key is not overthinking it.

I stand there rocking on my heels and passively gazing at the tourists sitting on a bench across the street until he's done. He puts his phone away immediately, and I loop an arm around his to keep him close as we walk. This part of West 52nd isn't that busy, but that changes when we reach the light and have to turn.

As we're walking, I point out the Ray's Pizza across the street. "That's the first place I ever ate in the city."

He glances at the walk-in pizza place, then back at me. "Oh yeah?"

I nod. "Not even because it's famous. I didn't know that. My first trip here was with my mom. I've wanted to live in New York City since I was a little girl, but my mom is so not a city person. We only lived a couple of hours upstate, but we never visited. Well, after my stupid first love I told you about took a sledgehammer to my heart, I was miserable. Mom wanted so badly to make the hurt go away. Of course nothing could, but she knew how much I had always wanted to come here, so she got the idea to surprise me with a weekend trip to the city." I smile at the memory of my first time walking these streets. "Since she had never been here herself, there was a lot she was unprepared for. Traffic getting into the city, first of all. We left the house two hours before we were supposed to check in because she

didn't want to get here early and not have anywhere to put our luggage, but then we ended up sitting in traffic at the tunnel for about 30 years, so by the time we got checked in and settled into our room, it was dark."

"The city looks good in the dark," Calvin remarks. "I'm sure it still made quite an impression."

I nod my agreement. "For me, yes. My mom is also a more fearful person. One of the reasons she never wanted to come to the city is that she was convinced it was a dangerous place with muggers and bad guys around every corner. During the day she was okay with braving the city just the two of us, but at night, she was afraid to walk around in the dark."

"Your father didn't come?" he asks conversationally.

I shake my head. "He wasn't around. He moved to Chicago when my mom was still pregnant with me. Anyway," I say, glancing across the street before we pass it, "our hotel was in Times Square. It was dark, but we were starving and we needed to have dinner. I wanted to go there," I say, pointing to a second story building with fire engine red windows and *Playwright Restaurant* engraved on the sign hanging above them. "No particular reason, I just liked the name and thought it looked cool from the street. But as soon as we got inside and my mom saw the prices on the menu, her whole demeanor changed. Since she was a single mom, we always lived on a pretty tight budget. I wasn't even sure where she found the money for a spontaneous weekend trip. I was ecstatic when I realized we were actually staying *in* the city because I figured she would want to stay outside the city to save money. The restaurant isn't even that expensive, it's pretty reasonable by New York City standards, but to her it was a lot and she had already splurged on the hotel. My mom's a frugal woman; growing up, she always made me order water at restaurants because god forbid she have to overpay for a fountain drink. But I knew she wouldn't tell me no even if she wasn't comfortable with the prices because this trip was supposed to cheer me up, you know?"

He smiles faintly. He doesn't say anything, but *I think I see where this is going* is written all across his handsome face.

“So, I told her I changed my mind and we skipped out before the waitress came to take our order. Pizza by the slice seemed much more affordable, so we popped into Ray’s for a couple of slices instead.”

“Did you ever get to go?” he asks, nodding toward the restaurant.

I nod. “Yep. Charity took me there for dinner and drinks for my birthday a couple of years ago, then we went to see *Wicked*.”

“Good show.”

“Great show,” I agree.

“Did you and your mom have a good trip?”

I nod. “We did. We hit the M&M store,” I say, gesturing across the street when we’re about to pass it. “The Hershey store, the Disney store. Toys R Us was here back then, so we went there, too. She had sticker shock everywhere we went, though. New York isn’t the most budget-friendly city in the world.”

“No,” he agrees, smiling faintly.

“I loved it, though. The feeling of anonymity in this crazy busy city. It was like no matter how big my problems were back home, this place was so big it would eclipse them. It felt like I could escape it, and escape was this very tangible place.” I shake my head, my eyes probably twinkling with fondness. “I knew I had to live here someday. I didn’t know how I *would* given the cost of living here, but I was determined to make it happen.”

“And you did.”

“And I did.” I smile, looking over at him. “What about you? Have you lived in New York all your life?”

“Not quite. My parents live in the suburbs in Connecticut, but close enough. We made trips into the city pretty regularly. I always knew I would end up living here as my primary residence, but I have vacation homes in other places.”

“Like where?”

“Northern Italy.” He glances at me. “I have a small place there in Bellagio, right on Lake Como. It’s a quiet town. It was the first vacation home I bought. By my standards, it’s a pretty modest flat, but it has incredible views. It’s a great place to decompress and enjoy a slower pace when you need it.”

“Mm, sounds nice. I’ve never been to Italy, but I’d love to go someday.”

He reaches around and grabs my waist, pulling me against him. “I’ll take you. We won’t stay at my place for your first trip, though. Maybe part of it, but I’ll take you to one of the nicer resorts. There’s a place you’d love in Cernobbio, it’s called *Villa d’Este*. It used to be a royal residence, so it’s obviously very nice. Beautiful grounds. I always thought if I ever got married, it would probably be there.”

“Should I brush up on my Italian?” I joke.

He’s not as alarmed by my possible joke about us getting married as an almost first date should be. “No need. I speak it fluently; I’ll do the talking for you.”

I smirk as we pause at the crosswalk. “That must be your ideal scenario. Maybe you should have just whisked me off to Italy to begin with.”

He smirks back as people crowd around us, waiting to cross. “Maybe I should have.”

We walk the rest of the way to the theater alternating between companionable silence and small talk mostly about the city. When we get there, there’s a crush of people commiserating outside before the show or arriving in cars. The theater sign is lit up and a surge of excitement hits me because I love coming to the theater, and it’s not something that’s in my budget to do regularly.

I don’t love the crowds, though. Before we make our way through this one, I slow down and turn to Calvin. “Can we take a picture in front of the theater?”

“Like tourists?”

“Exactly like tourists.”

He cracks a smile. “I suppose we can if you want to.”

He draws out his phone and we turn so the theater is our background. Since we have already been touching and leaning close from the moment we left the restaurant, I don’t feel strange about leaning in and doing a typical couple pose with him while I snap a picture with his phone.

Jackson would never let me touch his phone. I grabbed it just to hand to him once when he left it on a restaurant table and he snatched it away from me like it had physically hurt to have me touch it.

I wait for Calvin to react to my going through his photos. I’m not snooping, just checking out the three pictures I snapped to make sure I save the best one. He doesn’t seem to be anxious about my having it, though. He doesn’t seem to care at all.

I assume that means there’s nothing juicy for me to find, which shocks me considering who he is. I’m still a bit tempted to *accidentally* scroll back an extra swipe just to see what kinds of things he takes pictures of, but I behave myself and settle with just deleting the two inferior shots.

“That one’s the best,” I say, handing his phone back with the photo still on the screen. “Hollis has my phone. Can you send it to him so I can post it later?”

He swipes the screen, not looking at me as he asks casually, “Why does Hollis have your phone?”

“I may have harassed him to bring it.”

He cocks an eyebrow and looks at me.

I smile sheepishly. “It was before I decided to behave.”

We head into the theater and find our seats. It’s not hard. Calvin got us box seats, which I’ve never sat in before, but it’s quite nice because the two of us are the only ones in it.

“This is nice,” I say as I smooth down the back of my skirt and sit down. “I’ve never been in a box before.”

“I don’t enjoy people. This is one way to mostly avoid them.”

I smile at his logic. “You’re a ray of sunshine, you know that?”

“More like a laser beam,” he says.

“The kind that destroys planets in sci-fi films.”

“Well, that planet shouldn’t have pissed me off.”

I chuckle and set my purse down on my seat. “Do I have to ask permission to pee before the show starts?”

I’m teasing, but he answers, “Couldn’t hurt.”

I pause halfway to standing and stare at him. “Are you serious?”

He smirks, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

I sigh, roll my eyes, and make my way out to use the restroom.

The show is wonderful, and having the box to ourselves is nice. It’s over much too quickly, but to be honest, I’m already a little tired. I yawn as Calvin hauls me confidently through the crowd. He makes a path so easily. It’s like the sea parts for him as he leads me out to the sidewalk without once bumping into anyone.

Hollis is waiting with the limo. Leaving with Calvin feels effortless, when usually I vaguely dread this part of leaving the theater.

I sigh, sinking into the buttery leather seat and putting down my purse. “This is the way to do shows.”

Calvin smiles, leaning forward to grab two champagne glasses as Hollis pulls away from the curb. He opens a new bottle and pours some for each of us, then leans back in the seat beside me. “I’m glad you had a nice time.”

“I did.” I look over at him. “Thank you for a lovely evening.”

“Thank you for enjoying it,” he says, his eyes glinting with pleasure.

I take a sip of my champagne, then lean in and kiss him with traces of it still on my lips.

My heart beats faster even though it’s just one kiss. I pull away before he can escalate it. Kissing him on the sidewalk outside a restaurant was public and felt much safer. Kissing him in the privacy of his car doesn’t feel safe at all.

Memories of the smooth leather against my bare thighs flits back, but I push it away.

Needing a safe distraction, I lean forward and ease my feet halfway out of my heels for a moment so I can let them breathe. They’re aching from all the walking I did in them tonight.

“Do your feet hurt?” Calvin asks, obviously noticing what I’m doing.

I nod, flexing my foot. “The shoes are beautiful and I love them, but heels aren’t known for being the most comfortable walking shoes in the world. If you ever feel like bringing my worn, comfy shoes from my apartment, I’d be quite grateful.”

“We can swing by your apartment tonight if you want to.”

“Really?”

He smiles. “Why not? You’ve been such a good girl. You deserve a reward.”

I roll my eyes at the notion of that being a reward, but I don’t say anything as he tells Hollis there’s a change of plans, to swing by my place, too.

Since we’re going to my place, I’m trying to remember all the things I wanted to pick up. My yoga mat, Marie’s wand, my shoes...

Calvin’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Here.” He pats his lap. “Give them to me.”

“My heels?” I ask, confused.

“Your feet.”

I just stare at him for a moment, not comprehending his request.

Why does he want my feet?

I don’t know, but I’m being Miss Agreeable tonight, so I slide my feet the rest of the way out of my heels and tentatively lift them as I turn on the seat. Calvin takes my legs in a gentle but firm grip and drapes them across his lap.

I’m following what he’s doing, but I’m still confused. I’m confused as he slides his palm up the inside of my calf and rubs, confused when he starts massaging my feet, even more confused when he does all this without first removing my pantyhose, which seems necessary if he planned to turn this sexual.

Once the confusion ebbs and I accept that he really is giving me a foot massage in the back of his limousine, I start to relax. I feel tingles when he lightens his touch and just skims my skin with his fingertips, relief when he puts some muscle into it and eases all the tension and aches from my body.

That part doesn’t seem to take very long, but I’m still enjoying his hands on my body, and he must be too, because he keeps rubbing even after he has alleviated my discomfort.

His touches are predominantly light now. My eyes drift closed as I enjoy the sensations, but I can feel him watching me. Paying attention to everything—my breathing, the noises I make.

Sitting up with my legs across his lap felt awkward, so at some point during the massage, I reclined on the seat. My whole body feels more relaxed. The languidness doesn’t abandon me when I feel the fabric of my sheath dress being pushed up, or the thin barrier of my pantyhose dragged down.

My pussy pulses when Calvin moves to his knees on the seat and pushes my thighs open. All that’s covering me is that little scrap of mesh

and string. His palms skim my inner thighs, then he hooks his fingers in the strings and drags those off, too.

I'm naked from the waist down. It's nighttime, but the city lights provide plenty of light so he can look down at me and see everything.

I expect him to fuck me now. I don't expect him to lean down and kiss his way up the insides of my thighs. I don't expect him to lift my ass off the seat and drape my legs over his shoulders so he can bury his face between my thighs and devour my pussy, either, but that's what happens.

His mouth doles out pleasure tonight because I don't fight it. I twist and writhe and cry out as he drags his tongue over my clit again and again, but it's not because I want him to stop.

Rapture is close and I want it, bad.

That's when he pulls out.

Makes me beg.

Undoes his pants and pulls out his cock.

"Beg for it," he commands.

And I do. Oh, I do. I want it. Need it. There's an aching void inside my body and I need him to fill it. I'd lock my heels around his ass and pull him into me if he were close enough.

He grabs my arms and pins them over my head. Shoves his cock into me and slams me back against the seat.

He fucks me roughly, but he teases my clit while he does.

When my orgasm hits, it hits hard. A scream bursts out of me, and I melt against the seat. My body is hot and sticky, and I can feel Calvin's cum between my thighs as he pulls out and sits back down on his side of the seat.

Breathing hard as I recover, I close my eyes. I should care that I'm lying here with my legs spread, Calvin's cum leaking out of me on the

expensive leather seats. I feel like I should feel self-conscious about it, like maybe he'll think I'm sloppy.

But then Calvin reaches over and rubs his cum over my entrance. He pushes his thumb into me to push some of it back inside and impossibly, stirs the tension he just released.

"I thought you were being a good girl tonight," he says, his voice gravelly.

My eyes widen and I look up at him. "So did I. Am I not?"

He scoops up another trickle of cum that leaked out and shoves it back into me with three fingers. "All of this should be inside you. Can't have you wasting it."

Something stirs. Something foggy, almost a memory. It feels like déjà vu, but I can't place why, so I ignore it. "Actually, I'm pretty sure it should be in a condom. I can't remember if I told you this or not—seems like I must not have—but I'm not on birth control. This is outrageously risky behavior. I would appreciate if you would start using condoms."

"No," he says.

I frown. I thought I worded it enough like a request, but even if I didn't, who cares? This isn't a sex thing, it's a real life thing with long-reaching consequences. He should be as invested in not getting me pregnant as I am—more, actually, because he's the one with a fuckload of money, and I'm the one he would have to pay child support for the next 18 years.

I guess he wasn't satisfied with my delivery, though, so I add, "Please."

He looks over at me, but doesn't answer.

He pushes the last bit of cum back into my pussy, then uses his thumb to rub my clit.

My brain tells me to be more persistent, but pleasure convinces me to close my eyes and let him drive out all my thoughts.

He makes me come again, and it's only when I recover from that orgasm that I realize the car isn't moving.

I'm on my back so my view out the window is a bit skewed, but I realize it isn't changing, either. "Are we there?" I sit up, moving my legs off Calvin's lap.

Before I get all the way up, he plants a hand on my chest and shoves me back down.

Startled, I look up at him.

He holds my gaze, then reaches over and pushes his fingers in my mouth. "Clean them."

My eyes widen and my heart jumps at the command. I swallow, then move my head forward, taking his fingers deeper into my mouth, and then drawing back so I can suck both of us off his fingers.

"Good girl," he says, sliding his fingers into my hair and leaning forward to give me an obscenely chaste kiss on the cheek.

His scent lingers in the space between us as he slowly pulls back.

He smells so good.

I keep my eyes open, staring at him until he's back against his seat.

He's watching me, too. Waiting for something.

I don't know what, but he doesn't like to tell me. He likes for me to figure it out on my own.

My tongue darts out and I lick my lips, considering. Then, to make sure my bases are covered, I tell him, "Thank you."

"For what?"

His voice is firm but sharp like the crack of a whip. It makes my heart jump.

I don't know.

But the thought scarcely has time to flit across my mind before I realize, yes, I do.

I gaze up at him innocently, then utter words that are anything but. “Thank you for your cum.”

I don’t know if it’s the answer he was looking for or not, but it’s definitely the right one. His gaze heats with something dark and possessive. It feels like watching a flame as you’re stoking it, making sure to keep enough distance so it doesn’t jump out and burn you.

“You’re welcome.”

The pride and pleasure in his voice hits me right between the legs. I just came—twice—but I feel so strangely hungry for some elusive... something... and I’m convinced he’s singularly capable of doling it out. I want more.

I shake off the odd desire as I hear the latch and realize Hollis is about to open the door. Hastily pulling down my dress and sitting up in one clumsy movement, I try not to look too guilty when the door opens and Hollis comes into view.

My pantyhose and shoes are still off, of course. I didn’t have time to get those back on, and my panties are still on the floor.

My skin heats with embarrassment. He has to know what we were just doing.

Oh my god, could he hear us?

As if nothing is amiss, he takes a step back so we can get out of the car.

Calvin leans forward and grabs my heels off the ground, but leaves my panties and hosiery. He kneels on one knee and lifts my foot, then eases it into the shoe just like he did that night in the dungeon.

The memory makes my stomach sink, but it’s at odds with the pleasure and arousal I just experienced at his hands moments ago. My body is a mess and doesn’t understand what I’m doing to it.

Once I have both heels on, I should theoretically be able to get out of the car on my own, but my leg muscles haven't fully recovered. I falter and have to grab Hollis' hand to keep from falling down.

"Thank you," I say once I've righted myself, humiliation deepening and warming my face even more.

Hollis nods indifferently and retracts his hand as I move past him. Calvin gets out behind me, and I glance back just as Hollis tells him, "She tripped."

Amused, Calvin says, "I saw. It was very gallant of you to catch her."

Hollis scowls and flicks me a glance that feels almost accusing. "Didn't want her to twist an ankle."

"Of course," Calvin responds, his tone level.

"For you, I mean. Obviously, it doesn't matter to *me* if she twists an ankle."

I shoot him a mild glare. "Gee, thanks, Hollis. Does the queen know about you? I think you might need to be knighted."

Calvin smirks and releases Hollis from this mildly unpleasant conversation.

I'm still mean-mugging the man when Calvin's hand finds my waist and he leads me toward the entrance to my apartment building.

"Come on," he says. "Let's stop tormenting poor Hollis."

"I don't understand why he's being so weird about me all of a sudden," I state, shaking my head. "He was like that all day. I said one mildly nice thing to him and he acted like I ripped off my clothes and begged him to fuck me. Am I not allowed to be nice?"

"He's probably extra sensitive about it right now. I *did* just have a man shot for having dinner with you."

“I guess that’s true,” I mutter, but it’s more generous than I want to be about it. “I’m gonna start calling him *Sir Hollis* just to be a dick.”

Calvin opens the door and lets me go so I can step inside. “I don’t think so. If you’re going to be calling anyone sir, it’s going to be me.”

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Chapter Thirty Four

Hallie

Over the next week, things begin to change.

When we get back to Calvin's place after the show, there's a blue silk chemise waiting for me on the bathroom counter. It's lingerie, soft and cool to the touch. I change into it before bed. I imagine since he already had me in the car, he'll let me go right to sleep, but I imagine wrong.

The next day when he comes home from work, he gives me a shopping bag with a pair of fuzzy slippers inside. There's a pair of Jimmy Choo glitter pumps and a pretty pink dress that I change into before dinner, too, but I appreciate the balance.

He let me grab a few of my things from my apartment after the show that night, so I start to settle back into my routine even though I'm staying at Calvin's house. Chef Ryan makes us dinner every night, and most days he stops by to make me breakfast and lunch.

I still don't get my phone back, but I stop asking for it. Calvin lets me check it each evening when he's home, and I imagine I'm getting brownie points by giving it back without complaint.

I am not, however, gaining any brownie points with Charity. Toward the end of the week she starts asking me if I'm mad at her, which isn't something Charity ever really does. I've never left her hanging and ignored her as much as I have since I started staying at Calvin's, though.

Deadline on my current project looms, too. I spend more time working, and even though Calvin isn't around to see it, he brings it up at dinner one night and tells me that when I complete whatever I'm working on, he wants me to cut my workload in half.

“In half?” I echo, my fork frozen midway to my mouth.

“Yes.” He grabs the stem of his wine glass and takes a sip. “You work too much.”

I sputter. “*I* work too much? You work as much as I do.”

“That’s the point. As much money as I have, there’s no reason for you to always be so busy.” He spears a tender sliver of beef and brings it halfway to his mouth before meeting my gaze. “I’ve ordered you a credit card, it will be here sometime this week. Use that for expenses, save all the money you’re making from work, then you won’t need to work as much.”

“And what will I do instead?”

“Whatever you want.”

He says that like it’s so simple, but it’s not.

I haven’t broached the topic since the night we went out, but that demand reaches a little too far and forces my hand. “Look, I’ve... I feel like I’ve been a lot better this week. I haven’t done anything to deliberately provoke you, and I have treated you like I would a boyfriend I consented to have, but... asking me to cut back on work...”

He watches me, waiting for me to finish that sentence.

I don’t know how to without annoying him. “It’s not... I can’t just work less, because if I do that now, I might not be able to get back to my current workload in the future. The people I work for could be annoyed or just find someone else to work with.”

Calvin shrugs. “Let them. That will give you more time to focus on your own projects. Why should you spend every bit of your time working for someone else and put your own ideas on the backburner? That’s nonsensical and unnecessary now that you have me.”

“I don’t *have* my own stories to work on. I mean, I’ve had ideas flit across my mind, sure, but nothing that will pay my bills right now. That’s why I work for other people, Calvin—to make money. Even with this credit

card for expenses... that's nice and all, it really is, but I still have the same bills to pay that I had before. I don't want a roommate, and I have to keep up my apartment even though I'm not living in it right now so it'll still be there when I have to move back to it."

"That's another thing. We're going to cancel the lease on your apartment."

I gape at him. "What?"

He nods. "I don't like your landlord, and you don't need it; you live here now."

"Well... yeah, for now..."

"Even if you didn't, I wouldn't want you living there. I would buy you a safer apartment, one with a bit more space in a better part of town. Hollis and Arson have both told me a strong wind could knock your door down; it's a miracle no one has ever broken in given you're a beautiful woman living alone."

I put down the fork and stare at my plate for a few seconds before shaking my head. "I can't turn down money I know I'll need just because you say so. If you're going to make me turn down a job, then... I mean, I hate to say this, but I need you to match it. Pay me what I would have made from that work so that when I go back to my real life, I'll have a bit of a cushion in case the people I work for have an attitude or just gave my job to someone else."

"That's not a problem. Actually, I can do you one better. Tomorrow I'll have my lawyer draw up a contract to make it official. Independent of what you make on your own, I will give you \$100,000 per year as long as I keep you."

My heart nearly stops—both because of that figure, and because the way he says that, like he considers it possible that he will keep me for *longer than a year*.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

Since I haven't answered, he looks at me across the table. "Is that sufficient?"

"I... What? I mean, what if you drop me before it's been a year?"

"Wouldn't matter. You'll still get the full 100 grand. We can set it up on a renewable, year-by-year basis. This way you have a dependable supplement to your income and you can feel comfortable lightening your load to free up more of your time."

I'm still speechless.

Possibly misunderstanding my silence, he adds, "And your credit card has a \$14,000 limit. I'll pay it off monthly, and of course, if you need more, you can always ask."

His tone indicates he would relish me asking, but I'm still totally thrown by all of this.

"You really think there's even a chance you'll still want me a year from now?" I finally ask.

His brow furrows with something like concern. "Why wouldn't I?"

I don't know.

I just know men tend not to stick around, and I don't know why one with as much to offer as he has would.

I don't want to say that and sound insecure, so we drop the topic for the moment and finish dinner. Afterward, he gives me my phone so I can check everything before he takes it away again.

The first thing I notice before any of the other notifications is that I have a barrage of text messages from my bestie. I don't know if that means something is wrong, so I swipe the screen quickly and tap Charity's name to see what's going on.

I scroll up and see, "WHAT IN THE HOLY HELL IS THIS?" Attached is a screenshot of the picture of me and Calvin that I posted a week ago.

“WHO IS THIS?”

“WHY HAVE YOU NOT TOLD ME ABOUT THIS PERSON?”

“WHY DID YOU NOT TAG HIM SO I CAN STALK HIM?”

I chuckle as I scroll through several more similarly enthusiastic texts. We’re on opposite sides of the couch, and I feel Calvin glance over at me.

“Who are you talking to?” he inquires mildly.

“No one. I was reading missed texts from Charity. She must have been busy this past week, she just found the picture I shared of us before the Broadway show.” My eyes glittering with amusement, I look up at him. “She wants to know why I didn’t tag you in it so she could stalk you.”

He smiles faintly. “She and I are so much alike in some ways. I think she was your warm-up for me.”

“Not for that reason, obviously, but *do* you want me to tag you? I hadn’t thought about it before she mentioned it.”

I tell myself I don’t care what he says, but I want him to say yes. Yes means he doesn’t care if other women see it and he’s happy for anyone he knows to see the picture of us together.

I’m a little letdown when he shakes his head no.

Jackson didn’t like to be tagged in photos, either.

“You sure?” I ask lightly.

“I don’t really use social media that way. If she wants to check out my past, tell her to visit my mom and look through a photo album.”

I freeze and blink at him. “You don’t use social media?”

“The company does, of course. I pay people to run that. And I have a profile up for reference, but I don’t update it. I only log in if there’s something specific I’m looking for. Sharing every experience and thought that flits across my mind? Not for me.”

“But... how?”

His lips curve up as he flips the page of the book he’s reading. “It’s quite easy, I assure you.”

“That’s so weird,” I whisper to myself as I start a text to send Charity. I hesitate for a few moments, trying to figure out what to say. I’ve told her nothing at all about Calvin. I didn’t know how to bring him up, and I didn’t want her to feel me only sharing part of the story because then she would demand the rest, and there’s so much I can’t tell her.

I don’t know how to talk to her about what Calvin told me. It’s not the kind of thing we can discuss over text, and she’s been busy catching up on work since she got back from her honeymoon, so we haven’t had a chance to hang out.

“This guy I met a while ago. He’s Jackson’s boss, actually.”

It only takes her a moment to text me back. “I am in full support of you fucking Jackson’s boss to get back at him. Didn’t think you had it in you, but I am so proud.”

I smile and shake my head. “That’s not why.”

“Have you talked to that little weasel lately btw?” she texts back. “I forgot to check in after my bachelorette party and make sure you weren’t talking to him again.”

“To be fair, you were a little busy.”

Busier than I knew she was, but I don’t say that.

“True, true. But Jackson is history, right?”

“Museums around the world are curating his collection even now.” I haven’t heard from him since the night he lured me to Hell to meet Calvin, and I never want to again.

Some part of me thought he might text me again to check in and see how I am after what he pulled me into, but the bastard didn’t even bother.

“Yay! Tell me all about this new guy. This has to be really new, right? You just went out with Lance like a minute ago.”

I spend a minute trying to think what I can share with her, but my brain won't cooperate. The road is completely blocked, so I close the text for now and check emails, social media, and—of course—make sure my login streak is safe.

My phone vibrates and another message flashes across the screen. “Hello?”

“Sorry,” I text back. “I'm at his house right now and I feel like I'm being rude. I'm also getting really tired. I'll text you tomorrow, okay?”

“You're sleeping over at his place?? Wow, that's like really serious for you.”

It is, and I don't know how to explain it.

To evade getting roped into the conversation now anyway, I send back, “Yes, lol, and I don't have my charge cord with me, so...”

“gotcha. Well, tell me everything tomorrow!”

I text back telling her to have a good night, but I feel a pull of sadness knowing I can't *really* tell her everything. I'll have to set up a lunch date with her one day so we can talk in person.

Of course, then she'll see it all over my face....

It feels like there's no good answer to that, and it stresses me out. I don't want my relationship with Calvin to interfere with my relationship with Charity, but at the same time, there's so much I can't tell her. Even if I gave her a sanitized version of our relationship, I think she'd conflate it with abuse. Which isn't exactly unfair, but if she picked up on that, she would flip the fuck out and make me get out of the relationship... which I obviously cannot do.

There's too much I can't explain.

My stomach is getting upset just thinking about it, so I try to push it out of my mind. I do one last round of notification clearing, update my social media with a picture of Marie napping on her blanket bed with a toy mouse tucked under her paw, and sign off for the night.

When I put my phone down on the cushion closer to Calvin, he closes his book and looks over at me. “Are you ready for bed?”

I nod and glance at the book. “Did you finish your chapter?”

“No, but I can finish it tomorrow during your phone time.”

He says that like it’s healthy and normal, but I cringe a little because it sounds batshit crazy. Also a little because who stops reading before the end of a chapter?

“See, when you say things like that, you sound like a crazy person, and I sound like a prisoner,” I say, turning on my butt so I can put my feet back on the floor.

Calvin is already standing, so he walks over and offers my hand like I need help getting up. I don’t, but I take it, anyway. He pulls me against him, then wraps his arms around my waist and leans in to kiss me. “Then let’s go to bed, and I’ll treat you like a girlfriend.”

Chapter Thirty Five

Hallie

Steam makes the glass door of the shower foggy, but I still notice when Calvin slips into the bathroom.

He knew I was showering. I had to work late tonight to get my current project finished on time, and I have to go in to work tomorrow. I'm not sure how it will go, if he'll truly make me take Hollis. I want to go by myself and meet Charity for lunch, but I also can't traipse through the city without my phone, and I don't know how to bring that up.

I've been agonizing about it in the background since Charity and I texted the other night. In her texts since, the tone has changed a bit. She knows I'm spending time with Calvin, and she thinks that's why I'm ignoring her.

I mean, it is, but not the way she thinks.

It's all stressing me out, so I thought a nice, hot shower would chase my cares away.

Apparently, Calvin thought the same thing.

He's naked when the door slides open, but not yet aroused. I just finished rinsing the shampoo out of my hair, so it's dripping wet as I take a step back toward the wall.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask lightly.

Calvin steps forward, taking up more of my personal space than he has a right to.

Then he takes up more, pushing me back against the wall and caging me in with his arms.

Something must be wrong with me because my heart flips, but then I feel tension between my thighs. I look up at him, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip. I can feel vulnerability glinting in my eyes, and it must please him because his handsome mask of hardness softens just a bit and he caresses my face with his now-wet hand.

Hot spray beats down on his muscular back and then my hands as I reach around him. I know I need to hang on because he got in the shower with me for the first time the other day, and I definitely needed a safety bar to hold onto.

It's such a coupley thing to do, showering together.

His hands move lower and cup my ass, then he lifts me like I weigh nothing at all.

My stomach drops at the feeling of my feet leaving solid ground. I'm quick to secure my legs around my waist even though I know he won't drop me, but something feels off. Wrong. My head swims a bit and I glance at the shower head.

Is it too hot?

Nerves move through me. I plant a hand against Calvin's chest and push him away gently. "Can you let me down?"

I'm not looking at him. I'm distracted by the odd feeling in my body, focusing on other things to make sure my vision doesn't sway.

"Now," I say more sharply.

Calvin lowers me carefully, frowning and looking me over with concern. "Are you all right?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I don't feel right. I need to..." I place a hand on the wall to keep myself steady and open the shower door. I'm not done, I haven't conditioned my hair yet, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm going to pass out. I need to get out of this hot bathroom.

Calvin follows me out, stepping ahead of me and grabbing a white fluffy bath towel off the counter. I see that he laid my *Aristocats* pajamas out for me to wear tonight. “Are you all right?” he asks, drawing my focus away from the pajamas. “Do you want me to get you some water?”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s probably—”

I stop mid-sentence, feeling a sickening surge, and walk as quickly as I can to the toilet with my feet still wet. I make it just in time to lean over and hurl into the toilet.

Ew, ew, ew.

Oh, that’s so gross.

I’m a little shaky as I sit back on my butt by the toilet, and more than a little horrified.

Calvin is standing in the open doorway of the bathroom partition. I quickly close the toilet lid and reach up to flush.

Wordlessly, he passes me the glass of water.

I take a few shallow sips to get the taste out of my mouth, then look up at him. “Thank you.”

His brow is creased with concern, his gaze locked on my face. “Are you feeling sick?”

I shake my head no. “Not now. I’m so embarrassed, that was so gross.”

“You’re sure?”

“My head hurts a little, but aside from that, I’m fine.”

He watches me for a moment, then apparently decides he doesn’t believe me. He helps me up off the floor and takes me to the bedroom.

I assure him again that I feel completely fine now, but he still makes me get in bed.

Once I'm there, bed feels amazing. I close my eyes and nestle into the haven of down blankets and silk sheets, and before I know it, I'm out.

When my eyes open, Calvin is lying in bed beside me. He isn't sleeping, though. He's lying on his side, watching me. His muscular upper body is bare. His bottom half might be, too, but I can't tell because he has a sheet draped across his hips.

The room is usually darker, but he left one of the blinds open, probably so he could keep an eye on me. That single window lets quite a bit of light in and tricks me into thinking maybe it's not super late.

Though I guess it could be that it's really early.

I want to know what time it is, but there's no digital clock on either bedside table. I didn't get to set my alarm for work yet, either. I usually set the one on my phone, but I obviously don't have it on me.

I guess I can ask Calvin to set an alarm for me, but I'm not sure when he leaves for work. I usually stay asleep for a while after he leaves, so that might not work.

I roll on my side facing him so I can ask how to handle my alarm situation, but I'm distracted by how handsome he looks with so much moonlight spilling in. I'm struck by the impulse to curl up close to him for a snuggle, but then I remember I just threw up, and he probably won't want me cuddling him.

"How do you feel?" he asks, seeing I'm awake.

I reach overhead and arch off the bed to stretch. "Good."

"Yeah?" He sounds skeptical.

I nod and smile. "I promise." I'm still tired, and I'd like to curl back up and go to sleep, but I need to brush my teeth first. "I'll be right back, I have

to pee,” I tell him.

“Take this.”

I’m already off the bed, but I turn back to see what he wants me to take.

He hands me a rectangular box that wipes the smile right off my face.

A pregnancy test.

My heart sinks and my gaze darts back to his face.

“Just so we know,” he says.

“Know what?” I drop the test on the bed like it’s on fire. “My god, are you serious? No. No. No, no, no. No way. I am not pregnant.”

“Probably not, but let’s make sure.”

He’s too calm. My entire being is flooded with utter panic, but he’s discussing this like it’s not the most fucked up possibility in the whole world.

I can’t be pregnant.

I *can’t*.

I only met him... how many weeks has it been? I try to think, but I come up with too many. That can’t be right. My period comes pretty regularly, every 26 to 28 days. I haven’t had one since before I met him. Should I have had one by now?

“I need my phone,” I tell him. “I need to check—what’s the date? When was Charity’s fucking wedding? I can’t think.”

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I snap. “You’ve cut me off from the world and I don’t even know what day it is!”

I hear him rip back the comforter as I make a beeline out of the room. I don’t head for the bathroom. I head down the hall, through the living room,

and go to Calvin's office where I know my phone is stashed.

I'm not sure what my obsession with the phone is. I haven't really minded not having it these past few days, it just feels like if I can get my hands on my phone, I can get my hands on my life and make sure I've only known him for a handful of days, and definitely not enough days to be pregnant and showing symptoms.

My god, if I'm pregnant, that might mean... would that mean it happened that night in the dungeon?

No. Nope, that cannot possibly be the case.

"There is no benefit whatsoever to making yourself so upset," Calvin says, walking through the doorway and stopping just inside the room.

He's not naked anymore, he's wearing a pair of black sweats slung low on his hips. His Adonis belt is visible, something my idiotic body feels compelled to notice, but my brain is in full-on panic mode and convinced my phone is the answer to all life's problems.

"I need my phone."

He doesn't move to unlock his desk drawer. Doesn't move at all, just crosses his muscular arms over his broad chest and stares at me.

I feel like I'm going to be sick again, but this time I think it's just worry.

"I can't be pregnant."

My voice sounds small and tremulous when I intended for it to sound strong and sure.

"Probably not," Calvin says gently, to comfort me. "But I had Hollis buy you a test so we can be sure."

I shake my head. I back up as if I can back away from what may have already happened. I'd lean against a wall and slide down it, but there's not a wall behind Calvin's desk, there's a built-in bookcase that spans the length of the wall. "I don't want to take it."

“That’s unreasonable,” he says, finally moving toward me.

I hope it’s to take pity on me and unlock the desk drawer so I can have my phone, but it’s not. He takes my arm and drags me back to the master bathroom, grabbing the test off my side of the bed on the way.

I’m still feeling resentful, but logically I know he’s right. Whether I take the test or not, the facts won’t change.

Maybe a test will even reassure me that I’m *not* pregnant, and serve the dual purpose of waking this lunatic up to the fact that he needs to start encasing his dick in a condom before shoving it into me.

The test Hollis bought for me is an early detection one. It claims it can even detect pregnancy before a missed period.

I can’t be sure—I track my cycle on my phone calendar, but I don’t have access to that right now to check—but I believe I’ve already missed my period.

I open the package and find two tests inside, so I guess if I don’t get the result I want the first time, I get one more shot.

I’ve been nicer to Calvin lately, but right now I’m grumpy as hell with him. He’s still lingering in the doorway while I open the test, so I glare at him over my shoulder. “Do you mind? I’d like some privacy.”

He doesn’t leave the room. Instead, he steps all the way in. He places a firm hand on my shoulder and leans in to kiss my temple. “I know pregnant women are prone to mood swings, so I’ll overlook the tone, but no, I won’t be going anywhere.”

My jaw hangs open and I stare at him. How dare he utter a thing like that? “I am not pregnant,” I grumble, ripping the foil packet open.

He remains by the sink while I take the test into the toilet partition, so at least he gives me that much privacy, I guess. I pee on the stick like I’m supposed to, then cap it and carry it back to the sink.

I try not to stare at it resting menacingly on the counter the whole time I'm washing my hands. The directions were specific that you should wait to read the results, and I don't want to fill myself with false hope.

I don't have my phone to set a timer, so I count to 60 in my head 3 times.

It's a tedious task for my brain to focus on which is apparently exactly what I need while the time passes.

I take a deep breath before I look. I tell myself everything will be fine and ignore the tightening of anxiety in my chest.

I pick up the little stick that determines something radical about the rest of my life.

One strong red line sits on the right side of the window. I read the directions. They're even printed on the plastic stick I'm holding, so I know one line means negative.

Unfortunately, a second, paler line is visible on the other side.

My heart drops like there's a lead weight attached to it. I grip the test harder and try to breathe through the panic rising up inside of me.

I feel like I should speak, even if only to utter a denial, but my throat won't work. My mouth opens and closes several times. Tears well up in my eyes.

That can't be true.

It *can't*.

This thing with Calvin was only supposed to be a detour, not a complete reroute of my life.

But now...

There's a little speck in my uterus that is going to grow into a human baby.

And it's his.

Oh my god.

This cannot be happening.

A knot forms in my throat. There's a heaviness in my chest, and a sadness that permeates the air around me as I try to grapple with this awful reality.

If this is true, I'll be tied to Calvin for the rest of my life. There will truly be no way of escaping him, and with the resources he has...

My god, he can make my life an absolute hellscape. He'll be able to control my every move. He has already shown how ruthless he can be, so there's every reason to suspect he would view a child together as leverage he can use to bend me to his will.

And he'll be right. I'll be utterly defenseless. His prisoner in the truest sense.

His pet.

For as long as he wants me to be, which was already the case with the blackmail, but now he'll have power over me even after that.

What will happen to me when I'm no longer what he wants?

A normal man might leave, but a man with his resources and controlling disposition...

My god.

"I don't want this," I say softly. "I can't..."

"It'll be okay," he says, his voice firm and reassuring as he wraps his strong arms around me. He doesn't know all the horrible thoughts going through my head, my fears about my fate if it's irrevocably tied to him.

I don't want his comfort, but I take it anyway. I let him guide me back to the bedroom. I climb into bed and let him hold me.

He probably thinks his strong arms around me symbolize support, but to me they might as well be steel bars.

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Chapter Thirty Six

Calvin

I didn't get her pregnant on purpose.

Right?

I probably did. I was pretty adamant about not using condoms with her, and I've never been one to have risky sex with random women.

Hallie isn't random, though. She's the girl in the red dress whose smile burrowed into my brain and stayed there, the rare spark amid absolute boredom.

And the woman who continues to think she'll eventually get away from me, which is a bit maddening.

Every single time it comes up, the way she talks about us is so temporary.

It's her own fault, really. I keep warning her that the limit does not exist when the question is, "What will I do to get what I want?" but she doesn't seem to be getting it.

Murder, maiming, the creation of human life—whatever it takes to ensure she's mine.

Besides, I'm eager to see what a little half-me, half-Hallie being will be like. It's the scientist in me, I suppose.

Hallie isn't there yet. She hasn't accepted it as I have, but then I guess I've given it more thought. Did I peruse her phone calendar and make mental notes about her cycle? Sure. Did I make sure I fucked her more than once when science indicated she was due to be ovulating? Possibly.

But I'm not God; I can't know her lovely body is so fertile that the first time I fuck her when she's ovulating, she'll get pregnant.

Anyway, I'm not sorry, and I know she is, but she'll get over it.

She sobs into my chest like our little miracle is the greatest tragedy of her life, and I hold her close and pet her hair, waiting for her to tire herself out. Given she emptied the contents of her stomach, when she runs out of tears, I tell her I'm going to warm up some soup for her and I'll be right back.

I texted Chef Ryan to make her a batch as soon as she got sick. I wasn't sure if it was morning sickness or illness, but just in case it was the latter, I wanted to make sure she had a healthy supply of soup in the fridge. This way while I'm at work, Hollis—who probably can't cook, though I suppose I've never asked—could easily warm up some lunch for her until I could come home to care for her myself.

She still needs to eat something. Her stomach is empty, and the baby will need nutrients to grow.

While Hallie's soup warms up, I pop into my office and sink into the chair behind my desk. I glance up to make sure she hasn't snuck up on me, then I reach behind me for the book I keep my key tucked inside.

Moments later the drawer is open and a wave of security washes over me. I place my hand on top of the folder I haven't used yet, and then push aside Hallie's phone and my clone of it. Hers isn't the one I want to look through right now.

Instead, I grab the clone I made of Jackson's phone. It's a less sophisticated clone. With Hallie, I used a special SIM card I designed myself. The ones readily available on the market wouldn't do what I wanted them to do, mostly because it would be very easy to use that kind of technology unethically. Which I am, but I needed up-to-date information on what she was doing, not just a copy of everything she had done up to the point of cloning. In order to get what I wanted, the SIM card in her phone and the one in my clone had to be linked.

With Jackson's phone, I didn't need to keep up with anything new. I only wanted a phone with copies of every photo, every video he ever took of her. I wanted their text message chain, the private messages sent via social media. I wanted to know every godforsaken link she had ever shared with him.

I wanted the Hallie Meadows back catalog: Jackson edition.

When I pull up the photos, it doesn't matter that her smile is for him and not for me. I scroll through and click the one of Hallie smiling happily at the phone camera, her face flushed, nose red from the cold, snowy weather. She's wearing her hair back, a bit damp and messy from the weather, and a knitted scarf. She's holding the hand of a dark-haired, red-nosed little girl bundled up in a snow suit. The girl is probably around 2 or 3. I don't know who it is, but I know Hallie looks happy. You can practically see the faint glimmer of maternal yearning in her eyes.

She's mad right now, but that'll pass.

Hallie will be a wonderful mother. I know she wanted children. Perhaps not mine, but she wanted them someday with someone, and I think in time she'll find I was an excellent candidate. The men in my family tend to be assholes, but at least we're intelligent, and the women are quite lovely all the way around. Good looks and healthy bodies run pretty strong. If she were flipping through a book of qualified candidates at the sperm bank, I think she'd find mine quite desirable.

As long as we have a daughter instead of a son, everything should be just fine.

It doesn't matter, anyway. It's done now, so she has to accept it.

I swipe away from the picture of Hallie and scroll through more photos. I'm tempted to play one of the clips, but I don't want to risk Hallie hearing her own voice and coming to investigate. I'm not sure how I would explain why I have a video that she sent to her ex-boyfriend. Sure, I could say he sent it to me, but I don't want to lie to her.

I do want to cheer her up, and she'll probably still insist on going to her work meeting tomorrow, so I take her phone out of my drawer, double check that it's hers and not the clone I made—they have different cases so I can keep them straight—and pop it on charge so she can have it tomorrow.

I also want to see what she does all day when I'm not here. I know she's upset, so I want to see if she reaches out to anyone or shares our good news. And, if I'm being honest, I want to know what she says if she does.

I lock up the drawer again and tug *The Count of Monte Cristo* off the shelf. I tuck the key away, then slide it back into place among the other leather-bound editions. Nothing about this one makes it distinguishable. I even ensure the spine lines up with the others so it wouldn't be noticeable that I've taken it off the shelf recently.

There.

I go back to the kitchen to grab Hallie a fresh bottle of water and her soup, then I carry it to the bedroom.

She's sitting up when I get there. I have a lap desk in the corner that I've used for work on occasion, so I set it up for her on the bed.

She's still a little sniffly, but in good enough spirits to quip, "Neat tray. Did you bring your previous hostage girlfriends breakfast in bed or something?"

I smile faintly, walking around to my side of the bed. "Of course not. You're my first reluctant girlfriend. I've never had to work so hard for the previous ones."

She dips the spoon into the bowl and scoops up a bit of broth and carrot. "Tell Chef Ryan I said thank you."

I nod that I will, watching her carefully bring the soup to her lips. "Make sure you rehydrate, too," I remind her.

She chews the carrot, dropping her spoon back in the bowl and uncapping the bottle of cold water I brought her. "Thank you," she murmurs.

“Of course.”

“I hope you’ll be as accommodating when I have pregnancy cravings,” she says sourly.

“Of course. Anything you want. Pickles. Ice cream. The heads of your enemies. Make a list, I’ll get it all done.”

She cracks a smile. “I suppose I could do worse than a baby daddy who offers to bring me the heads of my enemies.”

“Probably,” I agree.

Although she’s the one that made the joke, hearing it seems to have made her miserable. “Oh, God, I’m going to have a baby daddy.”

“Let’s never use that terminology again,” I suggest.

“Why do you have to be such a life-ruiner?” she laments.

“I don’t know. Perhaps it’s genetic.”

Her shoulders slump and she sighs heavily. “No one even knows about you. How will I explain a pregnancy?”

“Whirlwind romance?” I suggest.

She glares at me sourly.

“What if we went away for a bit?” I suggest. “We’ll have to schedule your first appointment with a gynecologist, of course, but then we could go away for a while. I could show you my place in Paris, or we could spend some time at my flat in Italy. Go out on the boat, have dinners at the restaurant downstairs, just spend some quality time together so you’ll feel better about things.”

“Why would that make me feel any better?” she asks.

“What about London? I have a place there, too. You could do some shopping. Maybe we could catch another show.”

“I don’t want to go to any of your homes,” she says glumly. “I don’t even want to be in this one. Why don’t you just let me go? Don’t they say if you love someone, set them free?”

“They do, but I don’t subscribe to such noble notions. Why would I want to let someone I’m fond of go? Doesn’t make a bit of sense.”

“I don’t think, ‘if you like someone, imprison and impregnate them’ makes a whole lot of sense, either.”

“Of course it does.”

She shakes her head no, but she’s just being silly. It makes perfect sense.

Nodding at the bowl, I tell her, “Eat your soup before it gets cold.”

She pouts those perfect, bitable lips, which seems to be a trigger for me. I find it so goddamn adorable that I’d throw the tray off the bed and yank her under me right now if not for the traumatic night she’s already having.

I’m tempted to anyway, but she starts eating the soup, and I know she needs her nourishment, so I leave the tray undisturbed.

“Can I set an alarm for myself on your phone?”

“You’re still planning to go to work?”

“I have to,” she says. “Besides, I’m not sick.”

It’s hard for me to see her exhibiting signs of illness and not think she needs to stay snuggled away in bed all day, but I understand she’s right. It’s the growth of our little one in her beautiful body that’s making her feel ill, and that’s something she may have to deal with for weeks, so I suppose she can’t stay in bed the whole time.

“All right,” I say, grabbing my phone. I set the alarm since she asked me to, but I’ll be gone by the time it goes off.

I'll transfer the alarm to hers in the morning, but right now she doesn't know she'll have her phone tomorrow, and I don't tell her.

Once her soup is finished, I haul the tray to the kitchen while she brushes her teeth. We climb back into bed, and she turns on her side, sliding one arm under her pillow like she always does and wiggling until she's comfortable.

I can't help smiling. I love all of her little bed movements.

Fondness compels me to lean over and drop a kiss on her perfect lips.

It makes me so happy to know even now, my child is growing inside her body. I can't wait until that makes her happy, too.

My little dove is distrustful of me, though. Even my kiss seems to arouse her suspicions. Her brow furrows and she watches me like she's trying to decide what to make of me.

I love you.

I don't say it, of course. It sounds crazy, and she already thinks I'm crazy enough.

I feel it, though. Just being in her presence fills me with a potent mix of happiness, peace, and belonging.

If that's not what love feels like, then maybe I don't know what love is.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Hallie

It's morning when my eyes open again.

Calvin is gone, but he left me a pile of presents on his side of the bed.

Wiping the blariness from my eye, I try to sit up, but my body still feels tired.

I sink back down and grab the now-familiar matte black envelope off his pillow.

Hallie,

I have to leave for work, but I've transferred your alarm to your cell phone. Take it with you today, but I'll be retrieving it and putting it away again tonight.

I fed Marie breakfast so you don't have to worry about it.

Hollis has your credit card in case you decide to do any shopping.

Enjoy your day out. I hope your work meeting goes well. Don't forget that once your current commitments have been fulfilled, you'll be halving your workload. Now that we have a baby on the way, you can reduce it even more if you want to. I'm sure there will be plenty popping up to keep you busy.

-Calvin

That last line seems strangely ominous, but I don't think he meant it that way.

Sighing, I drop the envelope and force myself to sit up. I shift so I'm sitting cross legged on the mattress, then I haul the black Chanel bag over first. It's a small bag, and inside I find a long, beautiful necklace with black and pearly white beads on a gold chain with gold Chanel Cs in two places. It's fashionable and lovely, just my style.

I grab the Nordstrom bag next and pull out a cute skirt, black and white houndstooth check print. There's a thin white top with it, long-sleeved and ribbed, but it doesn't seem like it will be too hot. When I go to unfold the shirt so I can look at the whole thing, a note falls out.

You could wear this in Paris...

A smile claims my lips, but I shake my head.

He's so crazy.

Since I have my phone today, I grab it and text him, "I'm not going to Paris with you."

A moment passes before he sends back, "Why?"

I ignore his crazy question and grab the shoe box to see which shoes he picked out for me today. It's a pair of black sandals with a strap over the toe and an ankle strap. There's a heel, but it's a low one.

My phone buzzes and I grab it, expecting it to be Calvin trying to sell me on Paris some more, but it's Charity.

Forgetting for a moment all the crap we shouldn't talk about, I text her back. I'm so proud of myself for being on top of it today. Since it crossed my mind yesterday, I ask her about having lunch after my meeting, and she agrees.

I gather all my new things and go in to take a shower and get ready for the day. I woke up before my alarm and forgot to turn it off, so it goes off while I'm in the shower.

As I'm doing my hair and makeup, I wonder if I should text Calvin. He knows when my meeting is and what time I wanted to be up, but I don't know if he's sending Hollis, or I have to call for him.

When I emerge from the bedroom, though, Hollis is waiting on the couch. "Ready to go?" he asks, sitting forward so he can stand.

"Yep," I say, grabbing my purse and following him to the gallery.

The restaurant Charity wanted to meet at is an Italian place in Chelsea near her office. When I get there, she's already seated at a table with a red and white checkered tablecloth. She's sipping a martini and people watching, and I'm filled with a sense of just how much I've missed her.

"Hey, beautiful," I say cheerfully, despite my life lacking in cheer at the moment.

She turns her head and beams at me, pushing back her chair and straightening her charcoal gray skirt suit on her way over to hug me. "Hey, you. God, I feel like it's been a million years." She's frowning as she pulls back and grabs a handful of my necklace to inspect. "Is that a knock-off?"

"I highly doubt it." I move away so she drops the necklace. I'm disappointed she immediately brought up something that's going to lead us back to Calvin, so before she can ask about it, I ask her lightly, "How's the divorce coming?"

She rolls her eyes as she takes a seat on her side of the table. "Oh, I decided to keep him."

"That was generous of you."

“Really was.” She looks up, her eyes brightening as a woman I assume is our server brings over a plate of delicious-looking, incredible-smelling food. “Ooh, good,” she says, lightly clapping her hands together in anticipation.

“Whoa, did you order for me, or what?”

She really is a little like Calvin.

I never noticed it until he pointed it out, but I can kind of see it now.

“Just the appetizer, but believe me, you’ll thank me later.”

I eye it up. “It looks delish, but what exactly is it?”

“Baked goat cheese with tomato sauce and then this gorgeously toasted baguette to scoop it up with.” She gives her fingers a chef’s kiss. “Amazing. Brian from work brought me here for drinks a few nights ago and I swear to God, I wanted to move here. Let’s get you one of these passion fruit martinis, too. They’re amazing.”

I cut her off as the waitress starts to jot that down. “No. No alcohol for me today, thanks. Do you have iced tea?”

The waitress nods.

“Great, I’ll have that and a glass of water, please.”

The waitress smiles and tells me she’ll be right back. I consider digging into the appetizer, but if it tastes as good as it looks, I’ll want to be able to look back on its beauty when I’m longing to taste it again.

Since I have my phone on me, I dig it out and take a picture.

I watch Charity attack the dish first, using the edge of the toasted bread to smear off a little goat cheese and then drag it through the tomato sauce.

I grab a little toast for myself and do the same thing.

As soon as the food hits my tongue, my taste buds explode in a fit of flavor-induced pleasure. Covering my mouth, I murmur, “Oh my god.”

“Right?” Charity nods knowingly.

“I don’t even like goat cheese. Why is this so good?”

She smirks and double dips with the bottom half of her toasted bread. I take another swipe too, then as I’m chewing, I shoot a quick text to Calvin with the picture of the food. “Can Chef Ryan make this? If not, we have to come to this restaurant for dinner one night because you need to try this.”

He responds immediately. “Chef Ryan can make anything, but I’m happy to take you out for dinner anytime you like.”

Charity’s singsong voice pulls me from my texting. “Is that the boy?” she teases.

I nod, but don’t want to talk about Calvin, so I volley the conversation back to *her* love life. “Who did you say brought you here? Some guy from work?”

I watch her face to see if she looks guilty. Before, I would have never regarded Charity with suspicion, but now that I know she cheated on Tyler the night before she married him, I’m wondering if she just flits around having affairs and I somehow never noticed.

She nods, not looking at all guilty as she scoops up more of the appetizer. “Brian. He’s a major foodie and a major bragger. Bringing me here, he got to introduce me to an amazing restaurant *and* make me die of jealousy by comparing it to food he had when he was in Venice, so it was his ideal night.”

I smile faintly. “Is he cute?”

She frowns like that’s a weird question, which I guess it is. “Um, kind of. He’s like a more pretentious Joe Goldberg, but he’s also super, super gay. I take it things between you and Jackson’s boss aren’t going so well?”

“No, they’re... as well as can be expected.”

“What does that mean?” she asks, frowning at my discomfort.

I'm anxious that this conversation could go very, very wrong, so I scoop up another bit of goat cheese and tomato sauce, but as I do, a wave of nausea hits me.

No, no, no. Behave yourself, stomach.

The last thing I need is to get sick here in front of Charity.

I will the little devil's seed lodged in my womb to behave itself and look around to see if the waitress is any closer with my iced tea.

"How'd you meet him, anyway?" she asks, gazing at me across the table as she takes a sip of her martini.

"Um... well, I guess the first time I saw him was actually at Jackson's office Christmas party. I don't remember him, we weren't actually introduced, but he remembers seeing me."

"Aww."

"Yeah," I murmur, even though I know it's decidedly not an *aww* situation. I don't know how to explain how I met him. I don't want to tell her I blew off her bachelorette party to go hang out with my ex and his boss, but I can't tell the truth, either.

I'm saved by Charity's phone. She holds up a manicured finger and says, "Hold on one sec." Then she puts the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

Phew.

That was too close. She'll be distracted when she gets off the call, so I try to think of something to change the subject to when she gets off.

While I'm brainstorming, my phone vibrates, too.

I grab it and see a message from Calvin that reads, "Do you know your ring size?"

My eyes widen. "Um... yes? Why?"

"Just curious. What is it?"

That seems like a dangerous question, so I don't answer it. Instead, I tuck my phone away and return my attention to Charity while I wait for her to end her call.

We have a nice lunch chatting about Charity's honeymoon and the mountain of work she has had since she got back. I try to keep the spotlight solely on her, and only mention what I've been up to in vague, passing terms.

It feels a lot like lying, but I'm not ready to tell the truth.

Thankfully, despite her similarities to Calvin in some ways, one way she differs is that she doesn't pay as close attention to me. She's not as hung up on the truth, either, so I'm able to skate through lunch despite a few pretty obvious glaring moments that should have aroused her suspicions.

Charity pulls out her credit card at the end of the meal, but then I remember I have Calvin's.

"Wait! Lunch is on me this time," I say happily, grabbing the bill fold from her and digging out my pretty pink Discover card.

"Ooh, new credit card?"

"Brand-new and begging to be used." I slap it down in the bill fold and close it before handing it back to the waitress.

"That dirty slut," she jokes. "Hey, I have an idea. Do you still have some time?"

I nod. "Now that my meeting's over, I'm pretty much free for the day."

"Awesome. I need to get back, but since you bought lunch, why don't I get dessert? My credit cards want to be sluts, too."

"Did you have something specific in mind?" I ask, standing because she does.

She grabs her purse and slides the thin chain over her shoulder. "Wanna stop at Billy's and get a slice of carrot cake to take home?"

“Oh my God, yes.”

She grins and loops her arm through mine. “Let’s go.”

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Chapter Thirty Eight

Hallie

I'm in much better spirits after my day out in the world.

I had to leave Hollis hanging to walk to the bakery with Charity because I knew if she saw I had a limo with me, she would definitely have questions, and she wouldn't let me change the subject until I answered them.

After lunch and dessert with Charity, I swung by Nordstrom with my new credit card to see if they had the shoes Calvin bought me in any other color. They're beautiful and also super comfortable, so I'd have no problem owning more than one pair. Fortunately, they did. I was able to get a creamy nude pair, and a pair the same shade as Calvin's mahogany desk.

Oddly, I only really bought the second pair because they reminded me of Calvin. I'm not sure I even have anything in colors that will match them. I suppose I could accessorize a white summer dress with a belt in that shade if I can find one.

I pictured Calvin telling me how I can wear them in Italy, and a smile tugged at my lips.

Until I decided to brave the baby section.

Fear and anxiety replaced those light, amused feelings.

I gazed at booties, touched tiny little sleeves and poofy little skirts. I went through the baby gear and snapped a picture of a baby carrier I liked before I realized the absurdity of shopping for a car seat when I wasn't even convinced *having* the baby was a good idea.

Calvin and I haven't discussed any other options. In a normal situation with a man I had a normal relationship with, I would never even briefly

consider any other option, but this... this is no normal situation, and I'm truly afraid of the power a baby will give Calvin over me.

I know without asking, though, Calvin doesn't consider there being more than one choice in all this. I'm pregnant, so we'll have a baby. He doesn't have to think about all the possible consequences of that decision because he has all the power, he decides how everything will go.

Sure, I could cost him some money, but he doesn't seem to care about that. I assume it's because he has enough—or continues to make enough—that he knows he can't spend enough to run out, but I can't conceptualize that being anyone's reality.

I wonder if he knows there's a lot more to babies than financing them, though. He did say he was an only child. Does he have friends with children at least? I'm not sure. I realize I don't really know anything about his friends, other than the fact that some of them are obviously really dangerous.

How do you meet people like that?

Then again, I met him because of a chance encounter at a Christmas party.

I guess people meet all sorts of ways.

Before I left the store, I bought a super soft baby blanket I just loved. It was white with dusty pink giraffe spots and pink satin trim around the edges. I realized almost immediately that buying it would only encourage Calvin, and I didn't want him to come home and see it, so I asked Hollis to swing by my apartment before he took me home so I could stash it there.

"Not a word about this, you hear?" I asked as I climbed back in the limo.

He didn't confirm or deny whether he would keep my secret, but I took it on faith that he would keep his mouth shut—at least, unless Calvin somehow explicitly asked about it, but that seems entirely unlikely.

Chef Ryan shows up before Calvin to start dinner. I ask if he needs help with anything even though I know he doesn't. Then I decide to make the most of my "phone time" before Calvin gets home and takes it away again.

I start off with distractions— emails that aren't crucial, logging into my mobile app game for a bit. But now that I'm back at Calvin's after buying that baby blanket, my mind seeks out darker places.

He's normally on the couch beside me when I have my phone. I have a little privacy, but not enough.

Today he isn't here, and I have a lot weighing on my mind, so I take a darker path down memory lane—a foot path obscured by forest that I would ordinarily pick up the pace near so I could escape without it touching me.

There's a question in my mind that I don't want to ask. I don't really want the answer. Under ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't be interested in it. Some crimes are too heinous, and the people who commit them don't deserve redemption or second chances. My opinion on the matter is set, and I have no interest in reevaluating.

That's my philosophical stance on the matter, but this pregnancy requires a more practical one, even if it's deeply uncomfortable to think about.

I know there's no chance I'll be able to keep Calvin away from this baby if I have it, so the question must be asked.

Can a rapist be a good father?

I shudder just thinking it, but I'm committed to my course now, so I type his name into the search bar.

I pull up the page of the man who makes me sick. I haven't looked at his profile in ages, and looking at it now makes my stomach feel all wonky.

When I looked on a particularly dark night several years ago, I saw that he had a daughter. A little blonde girl with blue eyes and his nose who stood beside him smiling and holding his hand, blissfully unaware of the

type of person I knew him to be. He smiled too, that bland smile that said he was too cool to be here. He used to wear it all the time.

Of course, there's probably no way to tell on social media if someone is actually a good parent, or actually a good *anything*. The image is curated, so they can portray whatever impression of their life they want the world to believe.

Still, I want to look and see if I notice anything. Any frayed threads that might hint at the truth.

His life has changed a lot since last I looked. His profile picture is one of domestic bliss—him standing on a wraparound porch with his arm around a woman with dark curly hair and glasses, four kids of various ages standing in front of them. It's fall in the picture and it's summer now, so I click to see when it was posted. Late October. Huh. He used to change his profile picture every week, but I suppose it makes sense that he grew out of that.

I'm stunned to see so many kids, though. There are four, but none are the little blonde girl from before. I click through to look at his other pictures. I dislike seeing his face and its unrelenting smile. They're not all the too-cool smile. In some he grins and shows his teeth. In one he holds a bald-headed infant girl who giggles at his shenanigans.

I swallow. My stomach is sick. I want to stop looking, but I don't.

It's hard to reconcile the man I'm seeing holding his youngest daughter with the hedonistic monster who shattered me one night just for fun. He, too, was bored. I was sad and vulnerable from breaking up with a friend of his. He just wanted me to come over and hang out to help me get my mind off things.

What a guy.

Even back then he was fake as hell, and I remind myself of that as I swipe through picture after picture of him playing the devoted father.

Just because it looks that way doesn't mean it's real.

I click the picture of his wife or girlfriend, whomever mothered that baby girl. It doesn't take long to realize the three boys in the picture must be hers from a previous relationship, and only the baby is theirs together. Other than the picture of them on the wraparound porch, there are only pictures of him with the baby or the woman, none of him and the boys.

I don't know what happened to the other little girl I saw him with, but she's not in any of the pictures. I know he wasn't with her mother anymore, but it seemed like he still saw her since there had been pictures before.

I go deep down the rabbit hole searching for them, but the pictures are gone. I go through every one on his profile, but even the old ones I saw before seem to have been deleted.

I frown.

That's odd.

Why would you delete pictures you took with your daughter?

The oldest picture now is one of him pushing his newest daughter on an infant swing at the park. Ironically, when I glance at the comments, the first one I see is one of his old conquests commenting enthusiastically about what a great father he is.

Since I didn't find everything I was looking for, I click the profile of his girlfriend. It doesn't appear that they're married. Their last names are different and there are no wedding pictures that I can find. Her profile is much more private so I can't see much of it. She likes coffee, shopping, and birthday fundraisers. Their daughter has alopecia and that's why she doesn't have any hair in the more recent photos.

I don't realize how long I've spent looking until Calvin walks into the living room. I'm startled because I didn't hear him come in. Also because of what I'm doing. I fumble and drop the phone like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't.

Calvin shoots me a funny look.

“Hi,” I say awkwardly, grabbing my phone and flashing him a guilty smile.

His eyes narrow with vague suspicion.

Shit.

I go back to his page and take a screenshot of Mark’s profile to remind myself to come back later and see if I missed anything.

“How was your day?” I ask, swiping my screen and closing all my apps.

“Good,” he says, still suspicious as he sets his briefcase down on the counter. “And yours?”

“Also good. I had lunch with Charity after my meeting and went shopping afterward. Those shoes you gave me today were great, thank you.”

He nods, opening the case and drawing out a folder. “I’m glad you like them. What were you doing when I came in?”

I don’t know why, I knew I had been a little awkward, but I didn’t expect him to *ask*. “Um... phone time things.”

That’s an odd answer. I cringe at myself.

Great job, now he’ll never suspect anything.

Of course he does, he’s not a moron, but he doesn’t push the issue right now. “How have you been feeling?”

“Good. I got hit by a little wave of nausea at lunch, but I haven’t been sick again.”

“And Charity is doing well?” he asks as a matter of routine.

I nod. “Yeah. Just busy catching up on work after taking time off for her honeymoon. She wanted to know why it has been taking me so long to text her back lately, and I couldn’t explain that you dole out supervised screen time like I’m a child, so... that was cool.”

Calvin smirks. “I mean, you could have. Probably wouldn’t have gone over well, though.”

“Definitely not.”

He draws something else out of his briefcase, then walks over to the couch with it. He takes a seat beside me, and only then do I realize it’s a selection of glittering diamond rings around a black velvet cushion.

My heart flutters. “What is that?”

“We’re going to find out your ring size,” he says.

“Why?”

Rather than answer, he asks, “Do you like any of these?”

Of course I like them—they’re stunning. Well, most of them. Some are too large and I don’t like the look of those at all, but quite a few are beautiful. There are ovals and squares, clusters and teardrops, emerald cuts and round diamonds, too. Some are simple, some are gawdy, and a few are somewhere in-between.

It’s the in-between ones I like, but I’m afraid to tell him that.

“Pick one to try on.”

“I already know my ring size,” I tell him, not reaching for one.

“Pick one,” he says, losing patience, “or I will buy them all.”

My eyes widen. It’s his money, I shouldn’t care, but that would be such a waste. I grab the ring I like best and slide it on my finger. “This one’s nice, but it has too many diamonds.”

He takes my hand and inspects the ring on my finger, looking at the way the light hits it as he turns my hand. “What do you like about it? The cut? The band?”

“I—I don’t know, I just think it’s pretty. I like the shape.” I regard him cautiously. “Why am I trying on rings?”

“Because I’m going to buy you one.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve decided we’re going to get married.”

I *knew* that was where he was going with this, but I also knew that was too insane even for him, so I doubted myself.

Rookie move. Shouldn’t have doubted myself.

I don’t even know what to say. Of course I’m not going to marry him, but he must know I’d feel that way.

He carefully pulls a much bigger ring off the cushion. “Here, try this one.”

It’s so big, it looks like a chunk of ice. “It looks heavy,” I say reluctantly, drawing the simpler ring off my finger and tensing as he takes my hand and slides the ring on it.

He glances at me as the ring moves over my joint and settles into place. It’s sordid how intimate it feels, and I have to look away.

“This is an asscher cut, much less common than the others. The smaller ones on each side are trapezoids. All together it’s a little over 6 carats. I like this one best. What do you think?”

I feel hot just having a ring that expensive on my person. “I think... that’s too many carats.”

“The carats don’t matter,” he says dismissively. “You’ll be wearing it forever, I want you to have something nice.”

“You’re saying a lot of things,” I say, the ring on my finger suddenly feeling like a tiny shackle. “Can we take this off, please?”

His gaze shifts to my face. “You don’t like it?”

“It’s stunning, but it’s way too much.”

“I think it’s just enough.” He lifts my hand and rotates it slightly so I can watch the light hit the sublimely cut diamond. “It’s one of the best, and that’s what you should have.”

“Can we back up to the part where you said I’ll be wearing it forever?”

“Of course you will. It’s an engagement ring. We’ll be married. Marriage is forever.”

“Oh my god, is the air working in here?” I gaze helplessly toward the thermostat, but I know the rising heat isn’t coming from the penthouse, it’s coming from the pressure inside me.

“The setting has to be platinum because I’ve already picked out your wedding band and they’ll obviously have to match. It’s an antique piece from the 1920’s.” He flashes me a mild smile. “I thought that would suit you.”

“I’m not marrying you,” I blurt gracelessly.

My stomach drops as his gaze lifts to mine. I don’t know why I expect my words to matter, to perhaps cause some hurt. He’s unfazed, then he says simply, “Yes, you are.” He draws the asscher off my hand and slides it back on the cushion. “We have a few decisions to make. For a honeymoon, I’m thinking Greece or the Maldives. I know neither is terribly original, but they’re typical choices for a reason. Maldives has my vote, but I’m fine with either. Secondly, we should decide if we want to have a smaller wedding sooner before you start to show, or wait until after the baby is already here. Whichever we choose, I think we should take a honeymoon before the baby comes. Our time without her will dwindle fast, and we haven’t really spent enough time together just the two of us. It isn’t ideal, but of course I can hire the best care possible to help us with her. We’ll interview nannies when you’re a bit further along, but I’ve already started making calls.”

Nannies and honeymoons and...

“I’m not marrying you,” I say again.

“Yes, you are,” he repeats.

“You’re supposed to ask.”

“You would have said no,” he says reasonably.

My eyes widen. “Yes. Of course I would have.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask.”

“No still means no, even if you ignore it,” I inform him.

His steady gaze on mine, he says, “If you don’t tell me your preferences, then I’ll just plan it all myself. If you have a vote, now is the time to express your desires.”

I stare at him. “Do you know how unfair you’re being?”

“Very. I’m a bastard. Greece or Maldives?”

Sighing heavily, I consult my only reference for either place—some filtered shots that have passed through my feed on social media—and say, “I don’t know. Maldives?”

He nods. “I agree. Good choice, sweetheart.”

Choice. Ha!

“And the ring?”

I glance at the simpler one I liked. It’s cushion cut and much smaller, so it’s far less intimidating than the one he likes. Meanwhile, the asscher is just like him—stunning to look at, but way too much.

I can’t bring myself to pick a ring. It feels too much like consent.

“I’m not choosing,” I tell him.

“All right,” he says easily. “The asscher it is.” He plucks the ring back off the cushion and grabs my hand. I try to pull away, and his grip tightens. I meet his gaze warily, but there’s steely determination in his that tells me he won’t be moved. I know there’s little sense in fighting him. Whether he puts the damn ring on my hand or not, he’ll consider us engaged because he’s stark raving mad.

I sigh heavily and relax my hand in his grip.

Enjoying my submission, he smiles, his dark eyes glittering with approval. “Such a good girl,” he murmurs, and I hate myself for it, but my insides turn to jelly.

Trying to shake it off, I focus on the gorgeous, way too much ring instead of the gorgeous, way too much man. A ring is safer, despite its symbolism.

“And the wedding?”

I don’t say anything for a moment. A lump forms in my throat. I’m embarrassed to feel so emotional all of a sudden, but he’s demanding more than I want to give him—again—and this time, it’s... everything.

“Please don’t make me do this,” I say quietly.

He softens ever so slightly and reaches a hand out to cradle my face. It feels reassuring even though I know the reassurance is a lie. “The decision has been made.”

“Not by me,” I object. “This was never supposed to be forever. I didn’t agree to that. You said I had to stay until you were done with me, you never said it would be a life sentence.”

“You’re pregnant,” he says, as if I haven’t spent nearly every moment since finding out agonizing over the fact. “It can’t be temporary anymore.”

I shake my head miserably. I want to argue, tell him it can, that we can work something out, but I know it’s not true. Anything we tried to work out would always fall in his favor. Do I really want that? What if he did give up on me and meet someone else? I don’t see him casting aside the child we made together, but I could absolutely see him deciding he doesn’t want to share him or her with me anymore.

Cold seeps into me, deep down in my bones.

What would he do to me if I no longer fit into his life? If I were a hindrance instead of the object of his desire? He’s a bully at the heart of it.

He has good looks, nice manners, and polished ways, but he's tenacious with what he wants and doesn't let anyone stand in his way.

But it's not fair.

I shouldn't have to give in just because he won't give up. Especially not with stakes like these.

I had dreams, and he's stealing all of them.

I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes. I know he can see the tears welling up, and he knows they're because of him.

I don't say it to hurt him, I say it because it's true. "I don't want to marry you."

His voice is almost compassionate, as if he's capable of such a thing. "I know."

The tears touch the rims of my eyelids and I blink, trying to keep them from falling. "I don't want... any of this."

He's silent for a moment, then he says more solemnly, "I know."

Chapter Thirty Nine

Hallie

The bedroom is dark, but I can't sleep. My skin is still sticky with perspiration after the long goodnight pounding I just got. I'm naked, but I don't even care.

Lack of clothing is the least of my problems.

I look over at my left hand, the enormous diamonds weighing my finger down. I look past them at the man—my *fiancé*—who won't let me go. He's entirely indifferent to how much I don't want him, and I don't understand it.

He rolls on his side so he can look at me,

“Can we get a shag rug for the living room?”

“Of course,” he answers. “Whatever you want.”

I nod. It's not much, but I take my wins where I can get them. “I like shag rugs.”

He cracks a smile. “Then you'll have them in any room you like. If there's anything you don't like in the house, just let me know and I'll get rid of it.”

It's mean, but I crack a smile. “What about you?”

He's not offended. His eyes glitter with amusement. “I'm afraid that's the one thing that has to stay.”

“Damn.”

He reaches over and slides his arms around me, then hauls me up against his muscular body. He drapes me on top of him like a blanket, then

smiles faintly like he's content.

I'm too tired to keep my head up, so I rest it on his firm chest. "Did you want children?" I ask.

His gaze drifts up as if he has to consider the question. "I'm not sure. I guess I hadn't decided. It wasn't a must-do for me, if that's what you mean. I suppose I figured if I met the right woman someday, she would probably want a child, but I didn't expect to find a right woman, either. I was open to it, but it seemed unlikely," he concludes. "You?"

I nod. "Yeah, I wanted children. I grew up as an only child, so I wanted to have at least two. Maybe even four, if I was really feeling ambitious."

"Four?" The number startles him. "Well, as an only child myself, I can safely say four was never on my list, but I'm not opposed if that's what you want."

I crack a smile. "I didn't say I wanted to have four children with *you*."

"I'm afraid I'm your only option." We already covered that today, so he doesn't dwell on it. "I thought you had a sister. Georgia, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. She's my half-sister, though, we didn't grow up together. We didn't meet until we were adults. I mentioned that my dad left my mom and moved to Chicago when she was pregnant with me? Well, Georgia's mom was in Chicago."

"Ah. Affair, or...?"

"I'm not sure. Some sort of fuckery, it messed my mom up. She was raised in a pretty devout household, so having a kid when you weren't married wasn't something they were psyched about, but then to be left pregnant and alone..." I shake my head. "Wasn't great. She was heartbroken and kind of left to fend for herself."

"That's unfortunate."

"Yeah. We struggled a lot when I was little. We always struggled, really. We never got to a comfortable place, but she struggled more when

she was young. By the time I was two, we finally had this rental house to live in. It was supposed to be rent-to-own—she *desperately* wanted to own her own home—but the guy who owned it screwed her over. She was overly trusting and didn't get it in writing, so after she had already sunk a bunch of cash into repairs since it was supposed to be our house someday, he refused to sell it to her.”

Calvin scowls. “That’s unprofessional.”

“He was extremely unprofessional. A smalltime slum lord. He sucked.”

“Did you live there long?”

I raise my eyebrows and nod. “Oh yeah, we didn’t leave. My mom loved the house. She fell in love with it the first time she walked through it. It was a fixer upper, but she didn’t care. Said the place had great bones. She loved everything—the window seat in the dining room, the way the sun rose and the view of the front yard out of the bedroom window. She loved the arches and the built-ins, even the tiny hallway closet. We made a lot of great memories there, and she wasn’t willing to part with them just because the guy was a jerk. She has pictures on the wall of me riding a bike for the first time in that driveway in a little pink dress—because, yes, I wore a dress to ride a bike.”

Calvin smiles. “That doesn’t shock me.”

I smile fondly at the memories. “But yeah, she valued the house more than getting out from under that jerk’s thumb, so we stayed there and she just spent years renting the place. She should own it by now, she’s surely paid the place off at this point, but... the guy’s a dick.”

“I could buy it for you, if you want me to.”

My eyes widen. “Huh?”

“That way you would own it instead. I’m sure your mother would prefer that to the current situation.”

“I...” I shake my head, frowning a little. “I can’t ask you to buy me a house.”

“Of course you can. But you’re not asking, I’m offering. Besides, I’m sure the house is well within my budget.”

“What budget?” I mutter.

“Exactly.” He smiles faintly. “It’s not a problem, Hallie. If you want it, it’s yours.”

I consider that for several moments. It’s a lavish offer, even if he doesn’t think it is. I know it’s probably not such a big deal to him, my mom’s house probably costs a few elaborate shopping trips in his world, but to her, it would be a huge deal.

I bring my hand up to rest on his chest in front of me so I can look at the ring. “Are you really going to make me marry you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“We’ve been over this.”

“No, I don’t mean...” I pause to consider how to phrase it. I guess, simply... “Why do you want me? I’ve experienced things at your hands that most people would never want the woman they’re with even knowing they’re capable of, and... I am more than aware. I’m the one you did it to.”

He watches me steadily for a moment, then he grabs my arms, rolling me on my back and pinning them down at the same time. He uses his knee to spread my legs, sliding himself between my thighs.

I sigh and he leans in, catching my breath against his lips.

The kiss catches me off guard.

He slides his hand up, intertwining his and mine on the pillow and squeezing, then he guides my hand around his neck.

I take the hint that he wants me to wrap my arms around his neck, so I do.

His kiss is greedy and consuming. My blood starts to warm all over again as he lowers his weight down on me and kisses his way from my mouth to my neck. I sigh, this time because of the pleasurable sensation of his lips on that sensitive skin, and tilt my neck to give him better access.

Once he's finished kissing his way down my neck, he pauses, hovering over me, and looks down into my eyes.

I cock an eyebrow. "I take it you didn't feel like answering that question."

Calvin smiles. "I *was* answering your question." Rather than pounce on me again like it seemed like he was going to, he eases himself back down on the bed beside me.

I frown. "Because you like to fuck me?"

"Because you still kiss me back. You like it—you did even that first night when you didn't want any part of me, but you still do, even after all the shit I've done to you."

I frown, not entirely comprehending. "So... because I can handle all your crazy shit and still let you fuck me?"

He shakes his head, like I'm still not completely getting it. "No. I don't want someone who doesn't know the worst things I'm capable of, Hallie. I want someone who does, and wants me anyway." He props himself up on a bent elbow and considers for a moment, then he says, "Have you ever been to Mono Lake in California?"

I've never been anywhere on the West Coast, but I don't tell him that, I merely shake my head.

He nods like I gave him the answer he expected. I expect him to tell me how nice it is, to try and entice me with a vision of crystal waters and warm sun beating down on me as I play in the shallows outside some lavish resort I could never afford to go to without him.

Instead, he says, “It’s an unusual lake, toxic for nearly every creature that has ever tried to live there. The water is highly alkaline and saltier than the ocean. Aside from shrimp, no fish can survive there. Birds can’t tolerate it, either. On the way to the lake, you’ll see the carcasses of ones that tried. But for a particular kind of fly—alkali flies—it’s home. The only home that suits them now, as a matter of fact. See, ordinary flies would drown in such salty water, but these ones have adapted to their admittedly challenging environment. They’ve evolved to be able to dive under the water without getting wet. They’re able to make their own little air bubble to protect them so they can crawl under to feed or lay their eggs. The lake is an impossible place that kills all life that tries to inhabit it, but these special flies... they’ve brought life to it. They’ve found a way to thrive in its challenging climate. They’ve made the lake their home.” His gaze meets mine with more intensity than I’m prepared for given the topic. “If not for these extraordinary flies, Hallie, the beautiful but toxic lake would be almost entirely barren.”

I swallow hard. I’m not an idiot, I understand the parallel he’s drawing. “You think I’m the fly in this scenario.”

His lips quirk. “Well, you’re certainly not the toxic lake.”

I drop my gaze, fidgeting with the corner of my pillow so I don’t have to look at him. ““You’re a fly,”” I say, doing my best to lighten the mood a little. “That’s almost unbearably romantic. You should write greeting cards.”

“Not just any fly,” he says, amusement laced in his tone. “You’re *my* fly.”

I try to bite back a smile, but fail. I look up at him. “You’re insane, you know that?”

He could be offended, but he’s not. “So I’ve heard.”

My amusement brings him pleasure, or maybe it’s just my presence. Whatever the reason, I can’t deny I feel intensely admired when I’m around him—to the point of sheer lunacy, even. In my wildest dreams of how much

a man would want me, I could never have dreamed up one willing to go to the lengths he will to have me.

He doesn't play fair, but I can't deny he certainly makes me feel valued.

The way I've always dreamed about feeling with the man I would marry.

He may not be exactly what I imagined for myself—okay, not *remotely* what I envisioned, but it's hard to deny that I am drawn to him, even if he's a raving fucking lunatic.

I'm not enticed by the promise of lavish gifts or trips I could never afford to take without him, but I am very much tempted by the prospect of feeling loved.

Our gazes lock again, and this time I ask, "You really think we could be happy together?"

Nodding confidently, he says, "I know we can. You just have to decide the same thing."

I watch him for a few more moments, then I say, "You want to know something funny?"

"Sure."

I sigh, gazing at the handsome lunatic. "If you had just asked me out to begin with? I would have said yes."

I expect him to be surprised, but he's not. Grinning wickedly, he says, "Aw, now where's the fun in that?"

Shaking my head at his depravity, I roll my eyes, then I roll over so my back is to him. "Goodnight, crazy."

His arm slides around my waist and he pulls me back until my body is pressed against his. He lifts his head and kisses the bare ball of my shoulder, then he murmurs, "Good night, little dove."

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Chapter Forty

Hallie

Given my new, tentative acceptance of this absolutely ludicrous engagement, Calvin decides it's time for us to meet each other's families.

Because he is the human embodiment of "go big or go home," he also makes plans to accomplish all of that in the same weekend.

Both of our families live within day trip distance, but we book my mom first because I suspect she will be easier. I'm not sure how she will feel when I tell her—surprise!—I'm engaged *and* pregnant by a man she has never even heard of, but because Calvin's idea of a bouquet of hostess flowers is the *deed to her house*, I'm expecting her to love him.

Calvin said it would be simplest to put the house in my name instead of hers. Since I'll be his wife soon and New York is a community property state, what's his is mine.

"Does that mean *I'm* rich now?" I joke.

"Yes," he says, not joking.

I'm still not so sure about that. I'm still not so sure about *him*, but the last thing I want is for my mom to doubt that I'm happy, so I don't entertain thoughts like those on the way to her house.

Calvin sits beside me in the limo. We probably should have traveled in something less obnoxious given how far away it is, but Calvin likes to make an impression.

I get all the phone time I want this weekend since we're playing the parts of a totally normal couple for our parents. While we're riding to her house, I play my mobile game since I haven't been able to do much of that lately.

“Did you tell your mom we’re about a half hour away?”

“Not yet,” I say, my eyes glued to my screen as I consider whether I want to purchase coffee beans or potatoes.

“Is there anything special we could stop and pick up in town? Something she considers a splurge. Maybe a dessert from a bakery, something like that?”

I finally glance up from my screen to look at him. “Calvin, you’re buying her a *house*. You don’t have to also bring pie.”

Shrugging without shame, he says, “I want her to like me.”

“She will,” I assure him. Then, more teasingly, I add, “And I thought you didn’t care what people thought of you.”

“I don’t care when there’s no reason to. I expressly stated that one notable exception was amid a business merger where the opinion of the other party does, in fact, matter.”

I tap the screen to set sail, then I look at him solemnly. “Did you just refer to our marriage as a business merger?”

“In some regards, it is.”

I shake my head, looking down as some idiot pirate tries to attack my ship. “Well, I know what I’m writing in every one of your anniversary cards.”

“I want your mom to approve of the man you’re marrying. Is that a crime?”

“She will like you. I have already set you up to be well-liked, I promise. You’re doing the rest by *gifting her a home*. We are all set, I promise. Provided you don’t accidentally tell the truth about how you impregnated me, I think we’re all good. And honestly, even if she knew, I feel like she would have incentive to be forgiving given—one last time—you have purchased *our house* for her.”

He doesn't seem entirely convinced, but that's probably just because he knows logically that she *shouldn't* like him.

It's kind of cute how insistent he is about it, though.

Tension rises when we get into town, but it's not his baggage this time; it's mine. I left this town shortly after several heartbreaks, and to be honest, I never wanted to look back. It was an escape, pure and simple. I come back to see Mom for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but I've never been able to shake the icky associations I have with this place.

The rows of homes are just slums to him, but as we pass Swan Street, I recall the party I went to with Ross—my first love—down that road. His friends “joked” with me that he was hooking up with this girl I was really insecure about because they were weirdly friendly, just... too close for comfort.

I look over at Calvin. “Do you have any close female friends?”

He shakes his head. “Not really. Acquaintances, work colleagues. Not friends.”

“Have you ever cheated on a girlfriend?”

His lip curls up in disdain. “No.”

I get the sense he's offended by my question, but given how we met, I don't see how he could be. It's not like he's never done anything awful. “Okay, I just wondered.” I'm quiet for a moment, then I decide to take a page from Calvin's book and be more honest. “Actually, no, you know what. I have some baggage with that, I guess you should know. With my mom and dad's history, and then that wretched first love I told you about—he made me really insecure just for fun. He thought it was entertaining to see me all riled up and hurt about things.”

“What was his name again?”

“Ross.”

“Ross what?”

“Ross Ellison. And then even with Jackson, sometimes I got the impression...” I trail off, shaking my head. “It just didn’t feel like he was entirely devoted to me, you know? And that sucks. I want to be able to feel secure in my relationship, to know it’s not going anywhere. I want to be enough for the person I’m with. I don’t want them looking in other pastures to see if they can find anything better.”

Calvin leans forward on the seat, takes my hand, and meets my gaze. “That is not something you ever have to worry about with me. For one thing, there is no one better as far as I’m concerned. I’m only interested in you. Everyone else is boring.” I crack a smile. “Secondly, I don’t like cheaters. I watched my father do it to my mother for years, and it’s not something I would ever do. I wouldn’t be able to respect myself, and my own opinion *does* matter to me.”

“Most people probably think they would never do something like that at the beginning, but then life happens. Passions fade, interest drifts...”

“Only an imbecile driven purely by whim and unable to control himself wanders off a path he has committed to unintentionally. I’m many things, but not an imbecile. I assure you, you can take my word to the bank on this. That is not something I will ever do to you.”

I believe he means it. I even find his reasoning somewhat reassuring. “Would you put it in writing?” I ask lightly.

His brow furrows. “Writing?”

“A fidelity contract. I’m sure I’ll have to sign a pre-nup, right? Put a clause in there that nullifies the whole thing if you cheat on me.”

If he even remotely didn’t mean it, there’s no way he’d do something like that. I don’t know how much he’s worth, exactly, but I know it’s a lot.

“Sure,” he says easily.

I raise my eyebrows, a little impressed with how unconcerned he is about all of it.

The limo turns and my stomach sinks a bit. I know this road well because it's the road that leads to mine, but I usually take the long way so I don't have to drive by *his* street.

I know it's not his street anymore, but as we pass it, I still find myself glancing down the road Mark's mom and stepdad used to live on. I wonder if they still do.

I wonder if he lives here, too. When I was looking at his profile, his town wasn't listed, so I don't know if he migrated back here after he ran out of money in the college party town he moved to.

"What's on your mind?" Calvin asks.

I glance at him. "I just don't like this place." I shake my head. "The whole town. It's where Mom lives, but it's not home anymore. Hasn't been for a long time."

The dark clouds pass when we turn onto the street I grew up on. It looks a little different with Calvin here. I notice things I normally wouldn't—the broken shingles on the little brown house at the top of the street, the rusty stain dripping down the side of a house-turned-makeshift apartment complex. We pass another house-turned-apartment with shabby front steps and last year's Christmas lights strung up even though it's late summer.

I wonder what he thinks of the place. I know Calvin grew up with money, so I wonder if he pictured the place I grew up a little nicer.

I push away the anxious thought. I don't think it will really matter to him. He knew I came from a modest upbringing.

I glance around as Hollis stops at the last stop sign before my house. On instinct, I glance right, then left, to look for a car.

Only when I look left, my sight catches on something strangely familiar. A big beige house with a wraparound porch.

My heart seizes when I see that porch.

Sinks into my gut when I notice the dingy blue Knicks flag hung up beside the front door.

My chest tightens. I try to breathe, but I can't.

"Hallie."

I hear Calvin's voice, but it's not enough to pull me out of it.

It can't be.

It *can't* be.

He knows where my mom lives. He picked me up from there a couple of times. There's no way that selfish bastard actually bought the house four houses down from my mom's.

"Hallie."

There's more urgency in Calvin's tone this time as he sits forward.

I try to stop it, but I can't control my body. I can't make myself breathe. Panic sets in and the suffocating feeling intensifies.

Calvin is off the seat and sitting beside me a moment later.

The car slows to a stop because we're right in front of my mom's house.

"Hallie, breathe," Calvin says firmly, looking me in the eyes. His voice is calm and grounded. Once I lock eyes with him, he inhales slowly and exhales through his mouth, as if to show me how to do it.

I draw a shallow breath, my eyes not leaving his.

He models breathing for me again—the simplest fucking thing and I can't seem to do it.

"You're okay," he promises, still holding my hands and my gaze. "Breathe in slowly. Deeply. Now, let it out."

We go through the same repetitive motions a few more times, but it helps having him here, so steady, so calmly reminding me what to do.

Once the panic subsides and I can breathe again, I sit there looking down at my shoes so I don't have to look at him. I feel ridiculous and embarrassed. He must think *I'm* crazy now.

His voice still calm, probably because he doesn't want to set me off, he says, "Tell me what just happened."

I clear my throat, but still refuse to look up at him. "Once in a while I have panic attacks."

"Randomly?"

I shake my head. "Something always triggers them. I was on the verge of one the night I went out with Lance, when he tried to kiss me after dinner. Arson interrupted, and my body forgot what it was doing or something, I don't know."

"All right," he says patiently.

"It's usually something like that. If I feel... violated in some way that takes me off guard. If someone makes an advance I don't... want."

I glance up at him to see his brow furrowed in utter confusion. "Then why didn't you have one that night in the dungeon with me?"

I've lost sleep wondering that myself.

"I don't know," I answer softly.

He nods slowly, not entirely understanding, but not dwelling on it, either. "All right. But nothing like that happened just now. I didn't do... anything—"

I cut him off, shaking my head. "It wasn't you."

He scowls. "What do you mean, it wasn't me?"

This is so not how or when I wanted to have this conversation, but it seems kind of unavoidable at this point.

I swallow, trying to put the right words in order.

I look up at him and see I have his full attention.

“Remember when you... did that to me, and then I asked if you’d done it to anyone else?” He nods. “And you said I was your first?”

He nods again.

“Well, you weren’t mine.”

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Chapter Forty One

Hallie

It's not how I thought the visit would start, sitting in the car telling my most recent rapist the story of the jerk who violated me before he came along. It's not a story I like to tell anyone, and because of our unique circumstances, I *really* didn't want to tell him.

He could ruin absolutely everything with one wrong comment. He could be cruel or dismissive. He could identify more with Mark and have no sympathy for what I went through. I wouldn't be able to get past that, but I wouldn't be able to leave, either.

It's what I expect. It's what makes sense. Most people want to believe they're good, and how could he condemn Mark without condemning himself?

But, somehow, he manages. He manages to wrap his arms around me and hold me without it feeling icky or fake. Somehow, he can offer comfort for that earlier instance of pain despite having inflicted similar pain on me himself.

I got a little more upset than I expected to while I told the story. I have to swipe at my nose with a tissue from my purse. "I just can't believe he's that much of an asshole. To buy a house that close to my mom's..."

"Don't worry," Calvin says darkly before pressing a kiss to my forehead. "He won't live there for much longer."

I pull back and look up at him. "Are you going to buy his house, too?"

Calvin smiles. His eyes are warm for me, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Something like that. Don't worry about it. Just know that if we ever have to drive this way again, it will not be past his house."

“She’ll probably want us to visit for Christmas,” I murmur.

“Then I’ll make sure he’s gone by then.”

The way he says it, not like it’s a vague idea or a hasty promise made in anger, but as if it’s a done deal already, and I don’t need to think about it any longer...

I feel safe. Cared for.

We get out of the car and I take his hand. I didn’t plan to, but a swell of affection wells up inside me.

I may not like all the things he’s done, but I do like being with someone so willing to protect me. I like that feeling he talked about of always being on the winning team.

The screen door squeaks as it eases open. I grip Calvin’s hand a little tighter and paste on a smile.

Mom opens the door and steps out onto the small cement pad at the top of the few stairs. “Hallie,” she says.

“Mom,” I return, letting go of Calvin so I can run over and give her a hug.

“Oh, my goodness. You look so beautiful,” she says, squeezing me tight and rocking with me a little. She lets go and pulls back to smile at my face, but her smile dims when she sees my red-rimmed eyes. “Have you been crying?”

I wave her off with a smile. “Oh, no. It’s nothing. I’m a little extra emotional these days, that’s all.”

Her eyes widen.

Mine do, too.

I can’t believe I said that.

Her gaze flits to my stomach, then back to my face, uncertain. “Are you...?”

“Wow.” I laugh nervously and look back at Calvin. He’s at the bottom of the steps, about to come up. “Wow, I am... None of this is going the way I meant it to.”

“Hallie, are you pregnant?” Mom demands, looking from me to Calvin for an answer.

“Surprise,” I say weakly, placing a hand over my stomach.

Her shock only intensifies when she sees the enormous ring on my left hand.

“Oh, uh... surprise again,” I say, almost apologetically.

Slack-jawed, Mom stares at me, completely at a loss.

“So... can we come in?” I ask sheepishly.

After the catastrophic start to the visit, the rest goes as smooth as can be. Mom loves Calvin for every reason—he’s handsome and wealthy and gives off an excellent impression of a good guy.

It’s only in the moments when her back is turned and he shoots me a sinful look, or when she insists on me showing him my childhood bedroom and he slides his hand up my thigh, pushing me against the wall and kissing me the moment we’re alone... those are the moments the real him peeks out.

I like it, though.

It reminds me of his story about the flies and the toxic lake. Maybe he’s not the most traditional place in the world to seek refuge, but maybe he is the right one for me.

It will take time to know for sure, of course, but given we are apparently engaged and having a baby together, it seems like I’ll get plenty

of it.

In the car on the way home, Calvin has to return a few work emails and one phone call since he took the day off to go meet my mom.

I get tired of fighting pirates and draw out the little pad of paper I always keep in my purse in case there's an idea I need to sketch.

Since Calvin told me to cut my workload in half, I don't have any pressing projects to work on right now. I'll start a new one next week, but I'll have plenty of time to finish it—as long as Calvin doesn't haul me off to another country, anyway.

I don't realize how long I've been sketching until we're back in the city. I only have a pencil to work with so there's no color in the drawing, but I dust off the page and look at my handiwork.

And adorable little fly buzzes across the page. I smile faintly.

I wonder where he's going.

Maybe home to the lake. He's a brave little fly, daring to go where no one else dares go...

I tilt my head and look at him, then decide he needs eyebrows.

No, flies don't have eyebrows, but my fly isn't a realistic insect, he's a cute, child-friendly version. He's adorable, the kind of cute little fly guy you can see going off on big adventures as he grows up in this big, unusual world.

"What's that you're drawing?" Calvin asks.

I hold up my notebook to show him. "Isn't he cute?"

He smiles faintly. "He is."

I put the notebook back down on my lap. "I think I'll call him Eli."

"That's a nice name."

I nod. “I’ve always liked it. Maybe if we have a boy we could name him Elias and call him Eli. I could paint a mural on the wall in his bedroom.”

Calvin shakes his head, which surprises me. At first, I think he hates the name Elias, but then he says, “A boy is out of the question. Cutler men are too much trouble.”

I choke on a burst of laughter, but then I realize he’s serious. “Oh. Oh, honey. You do realize you can’t dictate the sex of our baby, right?”

Disinterested in that take on reality, he swipes his phone screen without even looking up. “We’re having a girl, and that’s that.”

I shake my head at him and go back to my sketch. Eli needs flowers to make his area prettier, maybe a bossy little bee friend named Isabelle.

I’m engrossed in my sketching, but I can’t help noticing when I see Calvin reach into his interior suit pocket and pull out a phone.

It wouldn’t be alarming... except his phone is sitting on the seat between his legs.

He has two phones?

Why would he have two phones? It doesn’t make sense that it would be a work phone. He has been doing work—or *saying he is*—on his regular phone, and to be honest, it doesn’t seem like Calvin has such a buzzing social life that he requires one. He has friendships for when he needs them, but it doesn’t seem like his need to be social extends very far beyond that.

Covertly, I watch him. He’s not on it for long. He waits for the phone to power on before sending a message. He waits for a response, and then sends another. Once he’s finished, he tucks the phone away in his pocket and resumes whatever he was doing on his main phone.

I could pretend I didn’t notice—he probably didn’t expect me to, given I was otherwise occupied—but curiosity compels me, and he *did* say he wanted honesty from me.

“Was that a second phone?”

He glances over at me, surprised I’m paying attention. “Yes,” he answers simply.

“Is it a work phone?”

“Not precisely.” When I just frown at him skeptically, he offers more of an explanation. “It’s a burner phone. When I communicate with certain people who don’t want their cellular activities to be traced, we communicate on burners. I had to wait until we were back in the city though, because even a burner can be traced by approximate location, and since we were out of town today, it would be very easy to deduce I sent the message.”

My frown deepens. “Are you doing something illegal?”

“Constantly.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

He cracks a smile at my panic. “I have a kidnapped fiancée, don’t I?”

I roll my eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant. Why do you have to communicate on a burner phone if you’re not doing anything sketchy?”

“I’m doing something very sketchy, that’s why the details won’t be communicated over a phone at all. Don’t worry about it,” he says, nodding at the notebook he clearly wants me to shift my attention back to. “I’m smart enough not to get caught.”

“All criminals think that until they get arrested. Why don’t you just... not do anything illegal?” I suggest. “I’ve just come around to the idea of liking you. I’ll be pretty annoyed if you end up in jail now.”

He rolls his eyes. “I won’t end up in jail.”

“Right, sorry. *Prison*. You never bother unless you’re doing something truly heinous, so I’m sure it would be prison, not jail. Let’s obey the law and avoid both places.”

“The law is so inconvenient sometimes,” he says.

I shake my head at him, but I know at the end of the day he’ll do what he wants.

“It’s sweet that you’re worried about me, though.”

I glance over at his devious little smile and shake my head. “If you end up in prison because you didn’t listen to me, don’t expect me to write you.”

“You’d write me. You’d have to—how else would I receive those anniversary cards you’re so looking forward to?”

“That is true,” I murmur.

He nods. “Besides, I’ve already made contingency arrangements in the event I ever got myself in more trouble than I could get out of. We’ll adopt new names, flee the country on a private jet, and lay low on a friend’s island for a while.”

“A friend’s island, he says,” I mutter, shaking my head. “You’re too rich. It’s offensive.”

“On the upside, without my having to work, you’d have me all to yourself.”

I press a hand to my chest as if I can’t handle the excitement. “Oh, my. What did I do to deserve this bounty of good fortune?”

Calvin smirks. “It sounds pretty good to me.”

“That’s because you’re a lunatic.”

“I’m just saying, the worst case scenario isn’t so bad as long as we’re together.”

“Aw,” I murmur by accident, not even being sarcastic. “That’s actually really sweet.”

The smug bastard nods before returning his attention to his phone. “And that’s how I know you’d write me.”

I roll my eyes realizing he's probably right. I probably would.

He doesn't have to be honest all the time and point it out, though. God.
So rude.

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Chapter Forty Two

Hallie

On Sunday when it's time to meet Calvin's parents, he's much less anxious about making any kind of impression.

I can tell he doesn't really want to go. I don't think he sees a lot of his parents, and I know from the story he told me that night at The Met that he very much does not like his father.

I still want to make a good impression, though.

I want to wear the pretty new mahogany sandals I bought, and luckily, I was able to find a matching belt. I pair it with a white dress Calvin bought me and finish the look with brown sunglasses. When I look in the mirror, I think I look like I belong in Italy again.

Maybe I should say yes to that. I *have* always wanted to see Italy, and I have the perfect outfit...

Calvin is already dressed in a black T-shirt with a charcoal gray pinstriped dinner jacket and matching pants. He looks striking, but he always does. It's the inside that can be a little off-putting.

Looking at his color palette and mine, I wonder if I should've worn black and gray, too. Calvin normally picks out my outfits, but he let me do it tonight.

Unsure if he'll like what I picked out for myself, I move closer until I catch his attention.

He leans back on the couch, and I'm unnerved by the sinful way his eyes rake over me—as if we were in a strip club and I'm standing here on a stage without a single scrap of clothing on my body.

Naked.

He makes me feel bare naked, like I can't hide anything from him.

He senses my unease. He knows I've come looking for his approval, and he likes it.

Smiling tentatively, I grab a handful of my dress and do a little twirl. "You like?"

I shouldn't ask. Shouldn't care. Still, when his eyes warm with pleasure and a sensual smile tugs at his lips, I find myself warming a bit.

"I love. You're beautiful, Hallie. Inside and out."

The man may be the devil, but he sure knows how to give a compliment.

"You think your parents will approve? I wasn't sure if I should wear something so casual, or maybe something more conservative..."

Immediately dismissive, he shakes his head. "You can wear a bathing suit to meet them if that's what makes you happy. My mom will love you no matter what, and if my father doesn't like it, he can fuck himself."

So, that answers that.

When the car pulls up outside of Calvin's family home, it's a much different sight than when we went home to mine.

His home is immaculate, there's no other word for it. It's a sprawling brick mansion gently accented with ivy, with black shuttered windows and a driveway so large, it's more of a road. There's an elaborate hedge maze out front with a fountain rising up out of the center.

Hollis enters the driveway and drives up toward the house. I look right, at the maze and the well-manicured grounds that seem to go on forever. I

look left, at the picture perfect mansion that somehow keeps the warmth of a home despite its grandeur.

“This place is amazing,” I say, looking around as I step out of the limo.

Calvin steps out and looks around, too, but he looks decidedly less impressed. His hand comes to rest lightly on my waist. “I’m glad you like it.”

He offers his hand and I take it, feeling a little out of my depths.

His parents don’t greet us at the door like my mom did. Calvin opens the door and gestures for me to go in ahead of him.

The house opens up and greets us with cream-colored walls and a staircase to the right. Beside it there’s an archway leading to another room, and a cozy little bench with cream-colored cushions. A bright, regal receiving room flooded with sunshine from the enormous windows waits ahead of us, but there are no people in it.

Calvin takes my hand to lead me through it. Once we’re past the accent table in the center of the room, I realize what I thought were windows are actually doors. Calvin pushes them open and we step out onto a gray stone terrace that wraps around the back of the house. It’s a well kept area that seems to be for entertaining. We pass an elaborate grilling area and a dining table with an umbrella over it. Past that there’s a rectangular fire pit—not an actual fire pit you’d throw logs on, the kind where the flames dance above a bed of smooth stones.

Calvin’s parents are seated on the couch back here waiting for us. While they haven’t noticed them yet, I take a quick look.

His mom is a slender woman in a butter yellow dress. Her leg is crossed over her knee, very ladylike, and she wears a white heel that appears to be from the 1950s. She’s wearing sunglasses and a sun hat and sipping lemonade as she smiles at the man across from her.

I would have known he was Calvin’s father even if he hadn’t told me. He could be a handsome man, in fact, I bet he was once, but he seems to

have soured with age. I wonder why? From the sounds of Calvin's story, it's not as if the man ever denies himself anything.

His mom notices us first. She gasps and puts down her lemonade so she can stand.

"Oh, Calvin!" Her face lights up with the radiance of a thousand suns and I know, without question, this is a woman who adores her son.

Calvin smiles back, opening an arm so he can hug her when she gets to him.

"Oh, my goodness," she says excitedly as she pulls back and shifts her gaze to me without letting go of him. "This must be Hallie. Oh, you're absolutely gorgeous. Look at the two of you." Then she lets go of him and grabs me for a hug, too.

"Oh, thank you," I say, laughing a little because she took me off guard. "You're so pretty, too. I can see where Calvin gets his good looks from."

That's a bold-faced lie; she *is* beautiful, but Calvin is a carbon copy of his father, just not ruined by... whatever has caused that man to look so repellent, despite being so technically handsome.

Maybe that's it. I had the thought earlier that Calvin is gorgeous to look at, it's the inside that's a bit off-putting. Maybe somewhere over the years, his father cracked, and all that poison leaked out and ruined him.

The Cutler curse. Maybe it won't happen to Calvin now that he has me to share that unpalatable side of himself with.

"Let me see this," she says with a conspiratorial look, grabbing my left hand so she can look at the ring. "Oh, isn't that beautiful." She looks over her shoulder. "Peter, come see Hallie's ring."

I look over at Calvin. "You're right, your mother is amazing."

He smiles, and the woman's eyes sparkle with happiness to hear her son has apparently spoken so highly of her.

His dad, on the other hand, moves over our happy little gathering with all the cheer of a storm cloud. He joins us, but reluctantly.

Nodding stiffly at Calvin, he says, “I see you’re doing well.”

“Very well.”

Because he’s expected to and his lovely wife encourages him to do so, he looks at my ring. “Looks expensive.”

Calvin’s mother looks horrified, but she holds her tongue and offers an apologetic smile. “It looks beautiful, dear. And beautiful on you. You’ll make the loveliest bride.”

Since this is our first chance to get to know one another, Calvin’s mom walks with me while the men fall back. I steal glimpses of the sprawling acreage as we walk. It looks like the sort of place English aristocrats pass down for generations, not somewhere an ordinary person lives.

“Do you see my rose garden?” she asks, pointing when she notices me looking at the yard. “I love gardening and Calvin thought I should have my own rose garden because that’s my name. Rose. Did I forget to introduce myself? Oh, I’m sorry, I was just so happy to meet you.”

I love this woman. She’s so sweet, I want to cuddle her and protect her from the cruel, cruel world.

“Your garden looks beautiful. I’d love to see it up close later if there’s time.”

“Oh, yes, I would love that, too.”

Since we came for dinner, we head inside after Rose gives us a tour of the grounds. The place is a little overwhelming—Cutler tradition, I suppose—but it’s beautiful, and I love it.

I can't imagine growing up in a place like this. It's magnificent, but knowing Calvin was an only child with this whole place to himself, I wonder if it might have been a little lonely, too.

"I can't believe this is where you grew up," I tell Calvin as we enter the dining room. He pulls out my seat for me, and I thank him absently before going on with a mischievous smile. "Do I get to see your old room like you got to see mine?"

Before Calvin can answer, his father does. "Oh, Calvin never lived here. The house we brought him up in was half the size of this one. A stately home, enough to satisfy most people."

I glance to Rose because I've learned quickly that she's an excellent barometer to check to see if things are about to get unpleasant. Her gaze lowers, which means yes, yes it is.

Calvin laughs, regarding his father with an actual grin, but not a pleasant one. "You're one to talk about not being satisfied with what you've got, aren't you, Dad?"

"Boys, please," Rose says, looking pleadingly at Calvin, since my guess is she has more luck seeking his mercy than his father's. "We have a guest."

His father points at him. "That's your problem, right there. You've never been able to mind your own goddamned business."

Calvin is dismissive. "That's not true. You just underestimate what I consider my business. If it's not my business, I don't care about it. If it affects someone I love, then it is *absolutely* my business."

"I don't know what's happening," I whisper to Rose.

She leans over the table to murmur back, "When Peter lost his job years back—"

Peter interjects, pointing accusingly at Calvin. "When *he* put me out of business. My own flesh and blood."

Rose continues, ignoring her husband's outburst to put a nice face on the truth. "We had a bit of financial trouble and had to sell our old house. Calvin bought us this one."

Ah.

That makes more sense.

This is actually *Calvin's* house, and he's making that proud old man live in it.

Yikes. That's brutal.

That explains a lot, though. No wonder Calvin's father has the look of a bitter, conquered man—he *was* beaten, by his own son.

I remember what Calvin said about how his father was a proud man intent on creating a legacy to leave behind for his son.

Does Calvin realize the actions he took have stripped every bit of dignity and achievement away from the old man?

What am I saying? Of course he does.

He has deliberately dismantled his father's legacy brick by brick and left the man no choice but to live in *his*.

He really is a ruthless son of a bitch. I wouldn't want to be on the other side of his wrath, but watching from behind the safety of his walls, it's almost impressive.

Calvin stops fighting with his father for his mother's sake, but it's easy to see there is no love lost between the Cutler men. The salad course is tense, but by the time the meal is brought out, Rose has steered us all back into much friendlier waters.

Watching the dynamic between Calvin and his father, though, I start to think about his insistence that we have a daughter. I can understand why he would feel that way if this is his model of a father-son relationship. I've never seen a healthy one myself, but I know it's not this.

If we have a son, it won't be like this.

I'll have to remember to tell him that later.

When dessert is served, Rose thanks the maid who brought it out, then shifts her pleasant attention on me. "You never told us how you two met. I was ecstatic to hear about the engagement, of course, but a bit surprised too since Calvin hadn't really mentioned you before."

"Well, I'm not surprised he hadn't mentioned me," I say, glancing at Calvin. Of course we discussed how we would approach the story of how we met in polite company, but now that the moment is upon us, my palms feel a little sweaty. "We actually haven't been together for very long."

I expect his father to jump on the opportunity to criticize his son, but the older man is silent, using his fork to slice into the cherry cheesecake on his plate.

"She was dating an employee of mine and I snatched her right up," Calvin says simply.

"After we broke up," I add, so she doesn't think I leapt off a smooth-sailing ship when I caught sight of a better offer.

"Mm-hmm." Calvin unwittingly mirrors his father, using his fork to slice off a bit of cheesecake, too. "The man was a moron who didn't appreciate what he had. He's lucky I waited that long and didn't pluck you right out of his arms." Glancing at his father, he adds, "Unappreciative men don't deserve to have extraordinary women."

His father smiles a mad sort of grin like he's close to losing it and shakes his head.

Wanting to spare poor Rose from another battle, I speak up again. "My cat loves him."

Peter halts and stares at me across the table.

"The furry one," Calvin says drolly. "Though I suppose the other one is fond of me, too."

It takes a moment for what he said to land, then I stare at him in open horror. “Calvin! Oh my god.”

He looks at me as if innocent. “What?” He holds my gaze, his eyes flashing with mischief. “Marie loves me.”

Ignoring her son’s highly inappropriate comment, Rose says, “I’ve always loved cats. We used to have a Chartreux named Misty. She just loved Calvin, she would follow him around everywhere he went looking for a snuggle.”

“Damn thing always chased my feet,” Peter says.

“Do you have a picture?” Rose asks me.

“Oh, yes,” I say, eagerly pulling out my phone so I can show off my kitty.

“When’s the wedding?” his father asks.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Calvin answers. “There wasn’t really a lot of time to think about it ahead of time. It probably sounds impulsive, I’ve never been one to spew lines like, ‘When you know, you know,’ but after just a few weeks together...” He hesitates, then looks at me. “I knew I had to marry her.”

My chest constricts, but not with anxiety this time. It’s the vulnerability in his gaze as he looks at me now, like it’s the simple truth amid all his fuckery.

My heart aches, and I don’t even know why.

Since he’s sitting near me, it’s easy to reach across the table and cover his hand with mine.

And since my hand is covering his, I feel the tension hit his body the instant his father says, “Doesn’t sound impulsive to me at all. By the end of the first date I went on with your mother, I knew I’d marry her.” He smiles faintly at his wife and reaches over to touch her hand atop the table. She

gazes back with absolute adoration. “Sometimes you see a piece you like, and you know right away you can’t let anyone else have it.”

All the movement in the room dies. The sunlight still streams in through the spotless window and the birds chirp outside as they dine at the feeder Rose put out for them, but inside this house, nothing moves.

I don’t know what to do. I can feel the tension in Calvin’s body building, and then he glances across the room at his parents, somehow a reflection of us as they sit there in the same pose.

Quietly, I pull my hand away from Calvin’s. I don’t want him to notice if he hasn’t already.

Thankfully, we’re at the end of the visit. Calvin scarcely says another word. His mother starts to ask if I’d like to see her rose garden, but then she notices her son’s volatile expression and she says she’ll show it to me next time.

She hugs us both goodbye and gives Hollis a slice of cheesecake she packed for him since he didn’t come inside with us. He cracks a smile and thanks her because she’s just too lovely not to feel good around.

Then we get in the car, and it feels like the storm clouds followed us.

Calvin slides over into his seat and sits there with the heaviness of a boulder.

I usually sit on the seat at the back of the limo so there’s a bit of distance between us, but today I drop my purse on that one and scoot over so I’m next to him. I curl my legs up on the seat behind me and lean into him, placing a palm on his firm chest and gently rubbing.

He looks over at me.

I look back, offering sympathy. “I’m sorry your father agreed with you.”

He cracks a smile at the ridiculous absurdity of that absolutely true capsule summary of what went wrong. “Me too,” he says wryly.

I glance down at his chest as I continue to rub it. “The way he worded it was ugly, but maybe he didn’t mean it that way.”

“He did.”

I nod because I know he did, I was just trying to make him feel better.

I’m not sure how to do that, but I know how to take his mind off it, at least.

Reaching for his shoulder, I lift myself and reposition so I’m straddling his lap. He looks up with interest, but I play at innocence, placing a hand on either side of his shoulder and kneading. “Let’s work some of that tension out of these powerful muscles.”

“Powerful, hm?” he murmurs, his gaze appraising.

I nod emphatically. “Oh yes. I love your shoulders. So sexy.”

“Is that so?” he murmurs, his hands settling on my hips.

“Mm-hmm.” I slide my hands down his biceps. “And these arms...” I stop rubbing one to fan myself.

Amusement lightens his tone. “With your artful subtlety it’s hard to tell, but are you by any chance trying to distract me?”

“Maybe,” I say, flashing him a teasing smile. “Is it working?”

He lets go of my waist with one hand and slides it up the delicate column of my neck. His touch is so gentle, gooseflesh rises and my eyes drift shut.

Then his grip turns to iron and my heart does a freefall. He yanks me closer, biting my bottom lip and then kissing it before I even realize why it stings.

I’m startled, but I kiss him back. Something molten and desperate twists through my gut. It feels like desire, but it has fingers or claws and seems to scoop out my innards so I feel hollow and empty without him inside me.

His rough voice hits my frayed nerves like an electric shock. “Do you know what would really make me feel better?”

Languid heat spreads through me and I lick my lips. I feel the icy fingertips of fear, but I feel arousal, too.

Rotating my hips, I grind against his cock. Not too hard, just enough to excite him.

His grip on my hip tightens. His grip on my throat does, too, but he stops before he can cut off my ability to breathe for even a split second. “No breath play,” he murmurs as his lips follow the trail down my neck. “Not while you’re pregnant.”

“Oh,” I say, my voice a little tremulous. “Right. That makes sense.”

“Be a good girl and grind that sweet pussy on me again,” he commands.

I bite down on my bottom lip, a little breathless as I do what he says.

“You like that?” His voice is so smooth, so sure. He knows I did.

He’s right.

He nods, pulling me closer and ghosting his lips across mine. I feel his breath on my mouth as he asks, “Do you want to be a *really* good girl for me, Hallie?”

His face is so close, I can only nod a little without bumping into him.

But I do. He knows I do.

His lips tug up, and it feels somehow like a reward. “Good. Then do it again... but remove your panties first.”

Chapter Forty Three

Hallie

Calvin decides that since I have good news to share with Charity and they haven't had a chance to meet, we'll have a small engagement party to celebrate. Just a small gathering with a few close friends.

The party is set for a Saturday night, so I'm not surprised during the day when people show up at the apartment while he's at work.

A party planner comes with her team to decorate and move furniture in the rooms where we expect to entertain.

Chef Ryan comes early and brings a helper since Calvin only likes tastes of things and ordered a dozen hors d'oeuvres.

But then there's one that surprises me.

I'm sitting at the island, shamelessly sampling the appetizers Ryan has finished making. Calvin planned more of a Mediterranean theme for the food tonight and I am here for it.

"Mm," I murmur, stuffing another chicken and pesto pastry puff into my mouth. I chew slowly to savor it, then look up at Chef Ryan as I swallow. "I know you probably get this a lot, but will you marry me?"

Ryan smirks. Before he can answer, a surprise guests appears behind me noiselessly like a creature out of someone's nightmares.

"I believe you're already spoken for."

I recognize that brash voice now. I turn to look at Arson. "Um. What are you doing in my house?"

Another guy is with him. He takes off down the hall while I stare, mouth agape.

“Excuse me,” I call after the guy, then look at Arson. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, Calvin knows we’re here. We’re checking the place for bugs.” Seeing my face, he adds, “Not that kind of bugs. Jesus. The kind a tech genius might hide if he wanted to listen to people without them knowing it.” He looks at Chef Ryan and shakes his head. “Can you believe this chick? Thinks I’m in here looking for cockroaches or something. What do I look like, the fucking exterminator?” He, too, reaches over and nabs one of the delicious pastry puffs, but he steals one off the plate Ryan gave me.

“Why would you steal my snack?” I ask, as if genuinely hurt. “That was so mean.”

“Life hurts, sweetheart, get used to it.” Then he steals another one.

I make a face at him, then grab the plate and turn my back to him. “Get out of my house, you monster.”

“Oh, it’s your house now, is it?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod confidently, then turn back around to hold out my hand. Although, on immediate reflection, I’m not sure how wise it is to show off such an expensive ring to someone Calvin has described as a criminal.

Arson barely glances at it. “Nice.”

“It is nice.” I glance down the hall the other man disappeared down. It’s where the bedrooms are, not even the rooms we’re entertaining in. “Why are you worried Calvin would bug the place, anyway? Aren’t you guys friends?”

“Everyone’s your friend until they aren’t.”

“Beautiful. You should put that on a throw pillow.”

He motions to the ceiling in a circular motion. “Make sure you give your husband a gentle reminder that all these fucking cameras better be off

before Nick gets here, too. He won't even come in if he feels like he's being watched."

"Nick?"

"My boss."

"Oh. He's coming tonight?"

Arson nods, then rudely abandons me without even properly ending our conversation to go check on the guy down the hall.

I look up at the ceiling. I've looked before, but I have yet to see anything that looks like a camera. I've looked at other places I thought a nanny cam might be hidden, too, because of the way Hollis behaved in here like he knew Calvin was watching, but I have yet to find one.

Arson talks like he knows they here, though, and I believe him.

Even if he is an abrupt, rude monster who steals snacks from pregnant women.

I make sure to start getting ready hours before the guests are scheduled to arrive. Calvin had to work today, but he promised to be home by four.

I shower and go through my skincare routine, then Monique comes to style my hair and do my make-up. I feel stunning by the time she leaves, but also exhausted. Being pregnant really takes it out of me.

I'm already wearing the glittering midnight blue dress Calvin bought me for this evening, but instead of putting on the heels and going out to wait with the staff, I decide to lie down for just a quick minute. I'm finding it hard to stay awake, but if I just rest my eyes for a few minutes, I'll be good to go.

That could be true. *Should* be true.

It is not true.

When Calvin comes in, I'm fast asleep in my party dress. The lovely hairstyle Monique gave me is smashed against my pillow, and all I want to do is sleep.

"There's my lovely hostess."

I know if Calvin is here, that means I slept for more than 10 minutes. I try to muster the energy to care, but I don't have it.

"Your hostess is sleepy," I murmur into the pillow.

The bed sinks as Calvin climbs onto it. He crawls across the bed so he's near the middle and closer to me, then I finally open my eyes.

"I take it little girl Cutler is making you tired today."

"Exceedingly tired. And how do you know I'm giving her your last name?"

Calvin chuckles, which I suppose is all the acknowledgment that cranky remark deserves. Imagine going to war with Calvin over a *name*.

With one hand, he gently pushes me so I'm lying on my back. I close my eyes again, but start when I feel his hand come to rest on my stomach. "How are you doing in there? Making Mommy tired is naughty. You can do that later, after the party."

I smile, a swell of tenderness surging up inside me to see him talking to our unborn baby. "Just wait until she's born and she never listens to you. It'll drive you mad."

Calvin is utterly dismissive of this possibility. "Of course she'll listen to me." Smiling faintly as if he's not about to bait me, he says, "She is her mother's daughter, after all."

I groan and grab his pillow to hit him with. "I'm too tired for you. Go away."

He laughs and takes the pillow, replacing it on his side of the bed. "It's time to wake up. I let you sleep as long as I reasonably could, but Charity is here and she's not happy. Remember that talk we had about sticky first impressions and the importance of nailing it before I met your mom? This probably wasn't the best way for us to be introduced."

I dart up in bed, wide-eyed. "Charity's here early?"

Calvin shakes his head. "I'm afraid you're late. Everyone is already here, I just couldn't bring myself to wake you up so I decided to let you sleep for a bit."

I gasp, rolling off the bed and touching my hair. "What? Oh, Calvin, why did you do that?" I run into the bathroom and see my hair is a bit of a mess. Not a complete catastrophe, but as expected, I look like someone who just woke up from a nap. "Oh, my pretty hair. Monique worked so hard on it."

"You look beautiful," Calvin says dismissively, coming up behind me and encircling my waist with his strong arms. "It's just a party. *Our* party, in fact. You can be as late as you please."

"The one time you're considerate," I say, shaking my head.

His eyes glitter with amusement. "If it makes you feel better, I'll promise to never do it again."

I sigh at him, peeling his arms off me and making my way out of the bedroom. "Did Marie have dinner?" I ask him as we enter the hallway. "I didn't feed her earlier, I was going to do it before everyone got here."

"Yes, I made sure to feed Marie."

"Your friends must think I'm a lazy bum, napping instead of greeting them."

"They think no such thing. Relax, everything is fine. Well, not Charity, she's in a bad mood, but now you're here, so I'm sure she'll cheer up."

The lights have been dimmed for our engagement party, the room decked out in shades of silver and midnight blue. I never even talked with the party planner, so I guess Calvin picked the shade.

He's dressed in a midnight blue suit to match me with silver accents.

That reminds me, I forgot to slip on the glittery Jimmy Choo pumps he put out for me to wear with this dress. I'm barefoot—that explains why I'm so comfortable—so I turn around and quickly make my way back to the bedroom.

When I come back out with my glitter silver heels on, I look around the room. Calvin is standing over where an intimate lounge area has been set up. There's a couch that isn't ours under a canopy of dark blue chiffon. Beside it is an end table with champagne chilling in a gold ice bucket.

A handsome man with dark hair and unforgiving eyes sits on the couch, taking up every bit of it. There are three cushions, but he sits in the middle and his aura takes up so much space, no one bothers to sit next to him.

At least, that's what I think at first, but then a girl in a tight purple dress flits over and sits on his lap.

Oh.

Okay.

We're lapsitting.

That's cool.

The funny thing is, it's like his thigh is a rock and he didn't even notice her slight weight. He doesn't move, doesn't look at her. His gaze never so much as flickers away from Calvin's despite the knockout wiggling her ass on top of him.

I see Arson nearby. I don't have to ask—the man who swallowed half of the room with his presence is definitely Nick.

Calvin is talking to him, holding Nick's attention entirely despite the best attempts of the cute little blonde on his lap. Her long wavy hair falls down her back, nearly covering more of her body than her dress is. She's smiling and trying so hard for his attention. She leans in to playfully kiss him on the cheek, and he puts a massive hand on her face and pushes her away.

Oh.

Yikes. I guess he wasn't interested.

Dejected, she gets up and goes over to talk with another girl I hadn't noticed.

I feel bad for her. Maybe I should go say hi.

"There you are."

Charity's voice cuts off my intentions to go make the girl feel better about being humiliated. I look over at her and start to smile, but my smile dies the moment I see her face.

Calvin was right; Charity is mad.

"What the fuck," she says, grabbing my arm and hauling away from where people can hear us.

"You're going to have to be much more specific," I say as I follow her down the hall toward the gallery.

Once we're in the gallery away from everyone else, she turns to face me, her eyes wide with disbelief. "What the *fuck*, Hallie."

"Okay, maybe I wasn't clear enough..."

She gestures wildly back toward the room. "What is this?"

"My engagement party."

"You have known this man for *two minutes*, and you know, I didn't even comment on that when you invited me. I thought, hey, Hallie's a romantic, maybe she got swept up, but what the *actual* fuck am I doing at a

party with *gangsters*? This isn't the roaring 20s. We don't party with gangsters."

"Shh," I say, darting a paranoid look at the hall. "They might be able to hear us."

"I don't care," she hisses, wide-eyed. "Who the hell is this guy? Why are criminals at his engagement party? And the *only* fucking people in attendance? I can't be here, Hallie. I work for the prosecutor, for Christ's sake."

"Oh. I... I hadn't thought of that."

"You knew those people would be here? You *know* those people?"

"I've met Arson, I haven't really met the other ones. I was going to meet some of his friends tonight."

Charity shakes her head, glancing at the hallway with her arms crossed. "Those people aren't friends. They're associates. I thought you said he was some kind of tech company exec."

"He is. He's the CEO of a tech company."

She nods, eyes bulging. "Okay, then you can see why I expected a far different audience here tonight?"

I sigh. "Yes. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I didn't really have anything to do with the guest list, I didn't know who was coming, I just told Calvin I wanted to invite you, and the rest of the guests were going to be his friends. It was only supposed to be a small get together so we could tell close friends and... celebrate."

Charity takes a deep breath, then audibly lets it out. Trying to be calmer, she looks back at me. "How the hell did you get mixed up with this guy? I'm supposed to be the one that does crazy shit. You're supposed to be the boring one who stays home with her cat."

I rear back, a little wounded by the offhand comment.

Charity sighs and grabs her forehead, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, that was really bitchy. I didn't mean that, I just... I'm really worried, Hallie. And I *really* can't stay. I can't be around people like that. You're on first name basis with Nicolò Severino's guard dog, and I just... who *are* you?"

I stand there and look at her, completely at a loss for what to say.

I'm still me, I think, but I understand what she means.

To be honest, if I would have passed a guy like Arson on the street a few months ago, I probably would have crossed to the other side of the road. Now I'm yelling at him for eating my pastry puffs.

I understand where her concern is coming from, though. What she's really asking.

I swallow and try to think how to word it. "Calvin is... different, and he does things a different way, but I actually... I actually think he's good for me. He stands up for me in ways I would never think to stand up for myself. I think in a weird way, he makes me more confident, more comfortable in my own skin. I always wanted someone who would *really* love me, you know? Like in a crazy, 'I can't be without you' kind of way, and... I think he does."

She stares at me like I've lost my mind, but she looks more helpless than anything. "I'm worried this isn't healthy, Hallie. I'm worried *he* isn't healthy."

I look down at my glittery shoes, then back up at her. "I'm okay. Whether he's entirely above board or not... I'm good, and I'm happy, and..." I chuckle at the absurdity, but my smile is real when I tell her, "I'm gonna marry him."

"It's a mistake."

"Maybe."

Charity shakes her head. "I can't just sit by and watch you do this. If he's hanging out with people like that, this man is dangerous, Hallie. It's not

cute, it's not fun, it's dangerous, and I..." She shakes her head, looking toward the hall. "Honestly, I can't be party to it."

I don't want her to leave, but I can't ask Calvin's friends to leave, either.

"Maybe we could get drinks and appetizers at that Italian place we liked in Chelsea one night and celebrate just the two of us."

"I don't want to celebrate," she tells me. "I think you're making a horrible mistake and I want to stop you."

I look down.

I don't know what to say. What I *can* say.

Charity doesn't have the same problem. She picks up momentum from my silence, nodding her head as she moves toward the elevator. "I'm going to. I'll show you."

"Charity..."

"No." She pushes the elevator button. It opens immediately, and she backs inside. "I'll show you who he really is, Hallie."

"Charity, please don't..."

But, before I can finish my sentence, the doors slide closed.

Sighing helplessly, I mutter, "...do anything crazy."

It's too late.

She's gone.

Chapter Forty Four

Calvin

I tried with Charity, I really did.

I wanted to play nice. She's Hallie's best friend, and I know Hallie loves her.

I also didn't want to waste all of my goddamn time watching her. She's not nearly as interesting as my Hallie, and my time would be better spent observing her than her faithless cohort.

In a perfect world, that's what I would be doing between meetings. Watching Hallie use her free time to bring her little fly named Eli to life with little pops of color. Admiring the absent way she brushes her hair out of her face when she's trying to concentrate.

God, I love her.

But no, I don't get to spend my work breaks enjoying my beautiful fiancée, because I have to keep my eye on her goddamned nosy friend.

I suppose I should have known better than to have Nick and Arson at a party with one of the "good guys." It would've been more convenient for me—and more lucrative for her—if Charity had gone the route of becoming a criminal defense attorney instead. Hell, maybe I could have gotten her some work.

But given she's the pain in the ass variety, she wants to separate us.

That's never going to happen. It wouldn't have happened even without a baby, but there's no way in hell she'll be able to pull Hallie from my clutches now.

And if she tries, we're going to have a very big problem.

I have a strong hunch she's already trying. It isn't easy convincing Arson to do this job—he can't even do it himself, he's too recognizable to her. Luckily, he knows a girl who goes to the same salon, and that provides the perfect opportunity. While Charity is getting lowlights put in her hair and gabbing with the stylist under a heat lamp, Arson's girl is able to get her hands on Charity's phone and swap out the SIM card for one of mine.

That in and of itself is very uncomfortable because this isn't technology that even *technically* exists, and I don't want my equipment in the wrong hands, but it's a calculated risk, and one I have to make.

I have to know what Charity's planning. It's the only way to stay a step ahead of her.

I'd love to find out I'm wrong. For my clone of her phone to paint a different picture, that of a vaguely alcoholic party girl who has her life slightly together and only pays enough attention to her sweet friend's life to pick out a wedding present for her.

That is very much not the case.

Unfortunately for her—and me—she goes on a research mission to uncover all the bad things I've had to do to protect Hallie. It's fucking irksome, honestly.

Jackson's overdose—oops.

But he betrayed Hallie, and it didn't matter that it was for me—he still betrayed her, and I wanted him gone. Now he is, and everybody's happy.

Then she discovers I purchased Hallie's mother's house long before Hallie thinks I did. That was a little too close to a lie, but I *didn't* lie, technically. When I asked Hallie if she wanted me to buy her mother's house, it just seemed simpler than explaining I had already purchased it in case I needed it for blackmail, but since she's such a loyal friend and sweetheart, I hadn't needed to use it.

It was an omission that didn't really matter, but now when she shows it to Hallie—*because that's obviously what she's planning with all this*—it's going to look bad.

She keeps digging, chasing a couple of roads I never took—a couple because I didn't know about them, a couple because I'm not *that* much of an asshole.

But then she gets on the right track. That's much more unfortunate because Arson was involved with all of that, and if Nick gets wind of this nosy lawyer poking into Arson's business, he'll kill her, plain and simple.

That would upset Hallie terribly. Me, not so much, but I don't want Hallie to mourn unnecessarily, so I decide to be the good guy for a minute and intervene before Charity gets out of hand and ruins everything.

Unfortunately, Charity tells Hallie she has to see her about an urgent matter before I can accomplish that. Hallie is working when she gets the call, so she's wearing around the house clothes and messy hair. She's trying to *work*, Charity, but fucking Charity is tenacious and must be seen.

So, she invites her up. To my penthouse. How fucking fortunate.

Because Hallie told me she has a tendency to check on her “old ghosts” on social media, I figured the day would come that she would learn at least some of the things I've had done for her, but I didn't think it would be so soon. I even thought there was a good chance that enough time would have passed that she didn't realize all of these things happened so close to when she told me about them.

But *fucking Charity* had to interfere.

I wish I could let Nick kill her, I really do. I have a feeling she'll be a persistent thorn in my side for the rest of the time I have to endure her, but I can't do that to Hallie. Not without trying to avoid it, at least.

I cancel my afternoon appointments so I can watch without interruption.

Dread settles in my gut as I watch Charity come in. She's still wearing a brown skirt suit from work, but when she opens her briefcase and begins drawing things out, I have a strong suspicion they're not legal documents from work.

No, they're not.

I watch her categorize my sins for Hallie. She starts with Jackson, which can't be proven. Of course, Hallie had no idea he was dead, so I watch as she covers her mouth—shocked, horrified even, but she doesn't know what this has to do with me. When Charity tries to link me to it, she comes off crazy, and I see Hallie's skepticism. I enjoy it. That's my girl, sticking up for me, saying there's no reason to assume I'm behind that—Jackson liked to party, it's not unbelievable that he took it too far one night and paid the ultimate price.

It's true, but I am behind it, and I'm not a damn bit sorry.

Jackson was an idiot. The world doesn't need more of those.

Then she slaps down incriminating printouts—including some I feel sure should be confidential, but I'm reluctantly impressed with her for risking her license to practice law in her efforts to save Hallie from me. It won't work, but I appreciate her energy.

She tries to tell Hallie that Ross Ellison—her doltish first boyfriend—was arrested for possession and found with drugs he swore he'd never seen before. It's an incredibly flimsy argument—*what criminal doesn't claim innocence when they're caught doing something they shouldn't?*—but for one thing. I *did* go slightly overboard with the amount of narcotics I bought for him. I hadn't realized the extent of the poverty Hallie came from and I was a little overzealous.

It didn't matter, of course no one believe that the drug fairy gifted him with more than what he bought with the intent to distribute, and there was corroboration with a girl he fucked for a couple of weeks and then ditched to go back to his on-again-off-again girlfriend that he had been talking about how he had an idea to make some money.

Spurned women come in very handy sometimes.

Hallie still isn't convinced I'm behind any of this, and I love her for that.

I pull up Nordstrom's website on my computer so I can absently order something for her while I watch the rest of this.

The next part is the problem.

I was angry when she told me about what Mark had done to her when she was younger. Not on moral grounds because he'd done a bad thing, but *how fucking dare he* do it to Hallie?

Hallie is mine, and it doesn't matter that she wasn't back then, she gets retroactive protection. Anyone who ever fucked her over from the time she sucked on pacifiers had better hope like hell that I don't find out about it.

I said more than I should have that day. She was upset and I wanted to comfort her. Hallie is too gentle to be able to appreciate something like, "Don't worry, darling, I will deliver that man's roasted dick on a plate for you to laugh at for ever thinking it could hurt you," so instead, I simply told her I would make that reminder go away.

And I did. I'm most proud of this accomplishment, to be honest. A trail of misfortune mysteriously follows anyone who has wronged my Hallie, but Mark's demise was the most layered, which made it fun to plan.

The first stage was digging up infidelity. Mercifully, none of these fuckers are capable of keeping their dicks in their pants, and that makes it much easier to ruin their lives.

When Mark's live-in girlfriend discovered he had cheated on her, she took the kids and left. Heartbroken by the loss of his family, it appears that poor, sad Mark yanked the stove out of the wall, causing a gas leak in the kitchen. The whole thing was declared a suicide because the fire had been set very deliberately—enthusiastically, even. In addition to the gas leak, he had doused the entire kitchen in gasoline before starting the fire, then the poor fucker sat right there at the kitchen table and watched while his whole house burned down around him.

That's not how it really went down, of course. Arson earned that nickname for a reason—had it changed legally, because he's a crazy fucker, but it did begin with him being a very enthusiastic fire-starter.

I wanted him for the job, didn't care what it cost. Because he genuinely likes to set fires, I knew he'd make sure it hurt.

I felt good about that one, but I can see Hallie doesn't.

She's pale and motionless, staring off at nothing, horror etched across her delicate features.

Oh, Charity. Why do you have to ruin everything?

The real problem is, now that she's realizing I am definitely responsible for Mark's death, it's much easier to believe I'm responsible for the other things.

Charity also presents an argument that I'm behind Lance being shot, but that was boring because Hallie already knew. Even knowing that didn't spread her doubt to cover the things I actually did do, but Mark... Mark was too far.

Hallie doesn't say anything to Charity, though, and Charity doesn't know why.

I do. Hallie has figured out that I have cameras.

She doesn't know where they are, and I know that because after she makes a very confused Charity leave, she walks back to the living room and calls out like a beggar praying to a God they're not sure is listening, "If you hurt her, I will *never* forgive you."

I suppose I am her god. Whatever happens in her life only happens because I command it.

Still, I love her and don't want her to be upset.

I decide to end the work day early so I can go home and assure her that I won't hurt her obnoxious, intrusive friend.

I don't like when there are factors that I can't control in play, but I'm also keenly aware that if Nick kills her for his own reasons now, I am *fucked*. There will be no convincing Hallie I wasn't behind it, so now...

Now I have to lie to her.

I don't enjoy lying. The truth makes everything far less complicated, but given the complexities of her relationship with Charity, I have to move carefully or risk damaging Hallie's heart. I have two different hands I can play, and I have to play a different one for each of them, but Charity's a wild card. I don't know her well enough to know how she will react when I play my hand at her table.

Hallie is sad when I get home. I hate it. She looks up at me with big blue eyes brimming with accusations.

"Is it true?" she asks simply.

I sigh and take a seat at the table where she sits listlessly, her drawing abandoned. "In some ways. I wasn't entirely honest about a couple of things, but I didn't lie to you, I just... didn't think the whole truth was necessary or helpful, so I didn't share it."

Then I explain what I can.

I expect she might be hurt when she hears that I had more ammunition to blackmail her with that I hadn't used, but she actually doesn't seem that surprised. She nods and says that makes sense—she wasn't sure how I got the deed so fast.

She asks if I had anything to do with Ross being arrested, and I tell her yes.

Jackson's death? Yes again. I didn't like the way he treated her, and I was greedy for the memories he had of her that I didn't.

To be honest, I think I would have had him killed just so I could have his phone. I don't tell her that part.

I could tell her about the clones at that point, but I don't. She already knows I watch her in the house. I don't want her to know that I can even see what she gets up to on her phone. Then she'll feel she has nowhere that's even remotely safe from me, and while that's true, there's no benefit to her knowing it.

I want access to all of her, every part. Whether she's playing that stupid game that makes her click a million things for no real reason, or texting a friend, I want *all of it*.

People tend to have a thing about privacy, though. I don't think she would understand.

She asks if I'm sorry, and I tell her the truth.

No. No, I'm not.

I only hurt people who had no qualms about hurting her. She might not be the kind of person who believes in an eye for an eye, but she doesn't need to be; she has me.

She doesn't seem to be as upset about Ross—which makes sense, as he's still alive—or even Jackson—which also makes sense after the way he fucked her over—but she's a bit hung-up on Mark's death.

“He had kids, Calvin.”

“I made sure the children were out of the house,” I assure her.

She shakes her head. “That's not what I meant.”

“I also made a donation to that alopecia charity the girlfriend was always posting about. I thought you'd like that.”

She sighs and looks at me like I'm hopeless, but it's a tolerant look. It's not, “You're hopeless and I'm terrified of you, get the hell away from me,” it's like I forgot to take the garbage out and now we'll have to wait until next week.

“I can't believe you did all of that for me.”

“I'm not done,” I assure her. “The house couldn't be saved, obviously. It burned up in the fire. It was very well set.”

“By Arson?”

I don't comment. For her own safety, she doesn't need to know that. “But, fortunately, the lot has gone on the market. Now I can buy it without

it looking suspicious. I thought we could do something nice with it, something you would like. Perhaps a park for our daughter to play at when we go to visit her grandmother?”

“A cursed park built on a murder site? I don’t think so.”

“All right. Something else, then.” An idea strikes me. “What about a cat shelter?”

Despite herself, I see a spark of interest. “A cat shelter?”

“I’m sure there are plenty of strays in that town and the ones nearby. We could make a shelter or a sanctuary, somewhere for cats with nowhere else to go. It would obviously be well-funded, so they could take in cats in need of medical attention, expensive surgeries or treatments. Maybe they could even do both. They could take in any cat that comes their way and adopt out the ones they’re able, keep the ones no one wants.”

Her interest is piqued. “I do like cats. And I suppose what’s done can’t be undone, but Calvin, you swore to me you wouldn’t hurt anyone else without explicitly warning me first.”

I hold up a finger. “That was when I was doing it to punish you. That’s not what this was.”

She shoots me a look. “I don’t need you being my personal harbinger of vengeance, either.”

I beg to differ. She hasn’t sought a bit of vengeance for herself, ever. Until I came along, people thought they could walk all over her and still get her to show up to help them out of a bad situation.

And they were *right*.

Obviously, I don’t say that.

She’s still like that, and I don’t want to cure her of it. That tendency to forgive is the only reason she’s sitting at the table calmly discussing this like we’re having a minor marital tiff rather than running screaming to the police station with all she knows.

Which is a lot. That night at Purgatory she couldn't have done much to me, but with all she knows now... well, that would be hard to get out of.

I don't acknowledge that she holds some power over me now. I'm sure she knows, but she's not the type of person who needs to flaunt it.

"Oh, I bought you something. Forgot to pick it up, though. I'll send Hollis to get it before dinner."

She levels me a look that tells me she is not amused. "This is not the time for presents."

"It's always time for presents."

"No. This is the part where you promise not to arrange anymore murders on my behalf."

I shake my head. "Not going to do that. I will promise not to kill Charity, though. It's important you know that's true, because the things she has been digging up... If your friend's not careful, she *will* get herself killed. Nick won't show lenience to nosy new lawyers who start poking around his business. He *can't*. He hasn't been boss for that long, he can't have people thinking they can walk all over him. Charity needs to stop playing Rambo and get her little ass out of my business."

Fear flashes across her face, but I can see that she believes me. "I'll tell her," she says nervously. "She's not trying to be nosey, she just wants to protect me."

"I know." I add an extra dash of compassion on because I'm grateful as hell she believed me so easily. It's the truth, but with all that just came out, I thought it might be harder to convince her. "You don't have to talk to her about it. I will."

Hallie frowns. "You?"

I nod. This is where I have to lie to her. I don't like it, but it has to be done.

"I'm going to tell her about the blackmail."

Hallie's eyes widen. "What? No, Calvin, you can't. If she knows you're blackmailing me—"

I shake my head, interrupting. "That's not the part I'm going to tell her. If you want to, that's your prerogative. I wouldn't because then she'll really get the idea that you're in a bad situation. I'm just going to present the blackmail to her and... well, use it on her. Obviously, I'm not blackmailing you to be here anymore. We're in love and having a baby, it's all real now."

"In love," she echoes dimly.

"We've calmly discussed murders I arranged and you're still here, Hallie. You love me."

"Oh." She frowns. "Maybe."

She does and I'm happy about it, but we can celebrate later when I get her pretty little ass in bed. "I'll lay out what I have on her and explain that if she wants to be a thorn in my side, I can be a thorn in hers, too. I'm not sure she and I will ever get along, but I'm not sure we ever would have, to be honest. We both have strong personalities."

Hallie smiles faintly. "That's the truth."

"But I'll do my best to get along with her, and I'll encourage her to do the same. We have a mutual interest in you. As long as you're happy, I don't see why we can't get along."

"She won't like being blackmailed," Hallie warns me.

"Obviously."

"Doing it to me was not adequate preparation for doing it to her."

"I understand."

I just also understand what she doesn't; that the blackmail I have on Charity isn't the Hallie special.

No, *fucking Charity* had a packet all her own as soon as I came into possession of Jackson's phone.

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Chapter Forty Five

Calvin

I knew I would have to trick Charity to get her to meet me, so I text her from Hallie's phone asking her to meet me at the place with the amazing goat cheese.

It sounds like Hallie, and it sounds like Hallie trying to be Nancy Drew and give a sneaky code, so she does.

I bought out the restaurant for the night because I needed privacy.

I let her get here first so she wouldn't turn and leave the moment she saw me.

There's a plate of food on the table with the appetizer Hallie loved so much, so I know she bought it. She's probably so hyped up imagining all the different ways she can help Hallie escape me that she doesn't even think twice about being the only customer at the restaurant, or about the obviously reduced wait staff. With only one table, they didn't need more than one waitress to work tonight.

But she doesn't notice, so when I walk in, she's caught off guard.

I note the shock on her face, watch it wash away like ocean waves on a sandy shore and leave ripples of betrayal in the sand beneath.

"She didn't sell you out," I say, pulling out the chair across from her and taking a seat. "She wasn't complicit," I go on, knowing that must have been her first thought. "Hallie doesn't know I used her phone to text you."

Charity shakes her head, her face etched in lines of disgust. "I'm leaving."

She turns to get her purse, but I stop her with a dismissive, “No, you’re not.”

She looks at me, bug-eyed and angry. “Yes, I am.”

I ignore her and drop my briefcase on the table. I see her slow down and watch me open it.

Curiosity gets the best of her. “What are you doing?”

I draw out the second Charity folder, the one Hallie doesn’t know about. “You and I have a few things in common. Other things, not so much.”

“Spare me the monologue, all right? I just want to know—”

“For instance, we both love Hallie.” I look at her. “Right?”

I can see that she doesn’t enjoy being lumped into the same category with me, even if that’s the one. “I do. You don’t. You’re some sicko who’s weirdly obsessed with her, but that’s not love.”

I roll my eyes and echo her own words back to her. “Spare me the monologue, please.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, full of attitude. “Is this the villain-hero showdown? Winner takes Hallie?”

“No.” But I smile, liking her melodrama. “I take Hallie no matter what, and there are no heroes here.” To emphasize my point, I place the Charity blackmail packet down on the table. The corner hits the plate and knocks one of the tiny toasts onto the table. “See, that’s one of the glaring differences between us.” I meet her gaze. “I know what I am. You? You’re a bit deluded.”

Laugh-scoffing at my audacity, she says, “*I’m* the deluded one?”

“Yes,” I say calmly, opening the folder so she can see the contents.

Her face falls instantly. Then it pales, and she sinks back down into the chair. I watch her swallow, grabbing at the paper and pushing the top one

aside to see the photograph underneath.

She cringes.

“Where did you get these?” she asks quietly.

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that I have them. That they exist in the first place.” I spread out the photos so she can see the one beneath it. “As if it wasn’t bad enough to have sloppy sex with your best friend’s moronic boyfriend...” I lift the *piece de resistance*—a copy of a medical form she had to sign when she left the abortion clinic. “You didn’t know if it was his or Tyler’s, did you?”

Her eyes fill with tears. She swallows and glares up at me. “You’re a fucking bastard.”

“I know,” I say almost sympathetically. “Now, I don’t want to use any of this, but I will. I’ll show Hallie everything—the texts, the pictures, the paperwork... I’ll show it all to her if you make me to get you out of her life.”

She shakes her head miserably and angrily dashes away a tear that betrays her by falling.

“But I don’t want that. That will cause Hallie immense pain. She loves you, and I would like for you to stay in her life because that’s what she wants.” I lean down over the table so she feels me near and her gaze shoots back to me. “And I will always look out for Hallie.”

She snuffles and her nose twitches. She wants to be defensive, but she knows I have her nuts in a vise.

I withdraw from my intimidating stance—I don’t need it anymore—and take a seat across from her. “However, the only way you’ll be able to stay in her life is if you don’t pose a threat to me. She hasn’t had a chance to tell you yet, but Hallie is pregnant. We’re getting married. We’re having a baby. I am here to stay, same as you. So, we will have to learn to live with each other.”

Charity shakes her head. “She won’t believe this. I know you’re a psychologically abusive prick who is willing to stoop to murder; she’ll never believe I just decided not to care.”

“She will because she knows I’m blackmailing you.” My hand is playing out well enough; I decide to up the ante. “I blackmailed her with it to begin with. It’s how I got her to spend more time with me. If she didn’t, I would send the other Charity packet I have to Tyler—the one where you fucked that bartender the night before your wedding. There’s a flash drive and everything. Anyway, she was perfectly willing to cover your ass and sacrifice her own to save your marriage. I told her I would use that to keep you from sniffing around things that could get you killed.”

“Are you threatening me?” she asks lowly.

“Not with murder, no. I won’t kill you, but my friends might if you keep looking into things you shouldn’t.”

Pissed off, she crosses her arms. “So, what? I’m just supposed to sit back and—”

“And be happy for your friend? Yes. I know there’s some part of you that likes controlling her. I understand that. But that’s not your job anymore. There’s another condition.” I nod at the martini on the table. Even amid her friend’s crisis, she had to order a drink. “I think you have a drinking problem. I think perhaps that’s why you keep accidentally fucking men you really shouldn’t.”

“Wow,” she says, shaking her head, but avoiding my gaze.

“The truth hurts sometimes. Hallie’s with me now and *I’m* certainly not going to fuck you, so you no longer pose a threat to her happiness in that regard.”

“I didn’t... It wasn’t like that. I’m not a horrible friend, it’s not like I sought to seduce her fucking boyfriend, it just....” She growls with aggravation, pushing her fingers through her hair. “It just fucking happened, okay? Same with the bartender. Sometimes I drink a little too much and I do

really fucking stupid shit, but don't say it like I set out to hurt her because I would never do that."

"I know. I believe you," I tell her. "If I didn't, you'd be gone. But it is a problem, and it's no longer just affecting your life, it has touched mine. Now it has to be fixed, or you have to be phased out."

She sighs heavily and rakes her fingers through her hair again. "So, what? You want me to go to rehab or something?"

"If you think you need that much intervention. I would be happy with meetings or counseling as long as you apply yourself and there's improvement. I don't have a set condition here, just whatever works. We'll help you as much as you need it." I wave over the server because I'm about done here. "Box this up for me, would you?"

The waitress nods and grabs the untouched plate off the table.

I look across the table at Charity as she walks away. "So, do we have a deal? You get help and play nice, I let you stick around?"

"It doesn't sound like I have a lot of room to bargain, does it?" she asks coldly.

"No, it doesn't." I'm much more cheerful. I'm ready to be done with all this so I can go home to my fiancée. "I know that people seldom change, so understand that while I'm giving you this chance to do better, if you start bringing Hallie down in any way, I will have to cut you out of her life."

She smiles bitterly. "And if *you* bring her down? Do I get to do the same?"

"I won't bring Hallie down. I'm only interested in lifting her up."

The waitress brings back a doggie bag for me. "Thank you," I tell her. She nods and starts to leave. Before she does, I say, "Hold on." I grab Charity's drink and hand it to the waitress. "She's finished with this. We'll take the bill."

When the elevator doors open on my gallery, all is right in the world.

Well, almost. It occurs to me as I look at the works of world-renowned artists hanging in my personal gallery, I have an artist living under my roof and I don't have any of her work displayed in our home. I'll have to remedy that soon.

I know Hallie *is* under my roof, but given all that has happened, there's a niggle of worry about it at the back of my mind. A doubt that whispers maybe she was only biding her time until she knew I would undoubtedly be busy, and she's run for the hills.

She's not in the living room or at her desk dreaming up lovelier worlds for children to get lost in. Tension gathers in my shoulders, but I roll it out.

She's in bed, that's all.

Still, I walk a bit faster, having to fight the urge to go to my office instead and check the tracker on her phone—but that wouldn't work anyway, because I have the damn thing locked up in my desk.

If she left, she's left without anything I can track, and I'll have to scour the whole goddamn city for her.

I ease the bedroom door open, my mind only half in the moment. The other half is inventorying every place I can think of that she might be, making plans of attack to knock the legs out from under her and get her little ass right back where it belongs.

But I don't have to worry because when the door opens enough for the hall light to stream in, I see that she already is.

The tension eases at the sight of Hallie all snug in our bed, one arm pushed beneath the underside of the blanket. She's facing my side. Maybe she was missing me.

I turn off the hall light and close the bedroom door. It's dark, but that's how I like it.

Quietly, I unpack her snack so that it's ready when she opens her eyes.

She hears me though, or maybe she just senses me. Whatever alerts her that she needs to wake up, I hear a soft, lilting moan as she rolls over and opens her eyes.

"Hello, sweetheart."

She smiles as I caress her face, probably sleepy enough to forget where I was tonight. "Hello, lunatic."

I crack a smile.

Okay, maybe she didn't forget.

"I brought you food."

"Ooh." She looks over at the bedside table with interest, but her gaze doesn't linger long before returning to me. Her soft sleepy happiness fades and she asks, "How did it go with Charity?"

"Very well," I assure her.

"Yeah?" She's skeptical.

"Even better than expected. You don't have to worry about it anymore."

"Mm." Her big eyes lock on mine, a soberness in her gaze that belies how comfy and angelic she looks right now. "You're always fixing my problems, aren't you?"

"When I'm not creating them, yes."

She smiles wryly, then pushes herself up in the bed. "What's this I heard about a snack?" I grab it off the nightstand for her, but before I hand it to her, she says, "Can you get me the captive girlfriend tray to put it on? I don't want to risk dumping tomato sauce all over your bed."

I correct her. “Our bed.”

Hallie rolls her eyes. “Fine, *our* bed.”

“I might be able to get you the tray, if you use the magic word.”

I stand, preparing to go get the tray for her, but I look expectantly at Hallie first, expecting her to say please.

“I love you,” she says instead.

I freeze.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip a bit self-consciously. “I thought about what you said, and—not for that reason, but—I... I think you’re right. I think I love you.”

For once, I don’t know what to say. A few seconds pass, then I say dryly, “I was really only looking for please.”

She smiles faintly. “I know. I just wanted to tell you.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed and cradle her face in my hand. “I love you, too, Hallie. Very much.”

Her smile turns sweeter. So sweet I yearn to taste it. I start to lean in, and she leans a little too. But then, before our lips can touch, she says, “Now, about that tray...”

I shove her mischievous little ass back on the bed and she laughs with delight. “I’ll show you a goddamn tray,” I mutter, smiling as I straddle her and she wraps her arms around my back.

It’s silly and ridiculous, and I had no hopes of smiling tonight, but that’s what Hallie does, what she has done consistently since the moment her smile put her on my radar and brightened my dark, lonely life.

She makes every part of life unexpectedly better.

And I can’t wait to spend the rest of it with her.

Epilogue

Hallie

As I close the storybook, I gaze down at the peaceful face of my beautiful sleeping daughter.

Ariella Isis Cutler. (She was conceived in an Egyptian temple intended for the goddess, so it only seemed right we incorporate Isis into her name somehow.) So much has changed since she came into my life.

The first copy of my book came today. It's a proof, not the real thing, but it only seemed right that my daughter should be the first one to enjoy the story.

Well, she enjoyed it for a couple of pages, then she started batting at her mobile—just out of reach, but she has her daddy's determination and was certain if she just reached high enough, she could grab the moon and all the stars and yank them right down into her tiny little grasp.

I hope it's not a sign of things to come. I'm not sure I can handle two of them.

I smile fondly despite the thought. Oh, who am I kidding? I could juggle a whole house full of those troublemakers.

I take the book with me as I sneak out into the hallway, then I pull Ariella's door closed, but leave it open a crack.

We're not staying in the city anymore. When Calvin's dad died from a massive stroke, we came to Connecticut to stay with his mom. She didn't want to be alone, and Calvin thought it would be good for us to get out of the city for a while.

"For a while" turned into much longer, and then he sprung what I assume was his master plan all along—let's just move here. Of course we'll

keep our place in the city, and we can visit any time we want to see aunt Charity or catch a show, but primarily, let's stay at the Connecticut house and enjoy all it has to offer.

Surprisingly, after years of yearning to live in New York and years of enjoying the city, I liked the idea. As big as the penthouse was, this place is much bigger. There's plenty of room to chase the baby around, and Marie loves it, too.

I've stopped illustrating for other people altogether, so I don't go into the city all that much. Calvin still has to drive in to work, but he generally leaves earlier so he can get home and spend time with us. It was important to him that Ariella have wide open spaces to explore when she starts to walk, not the busy, congested, at times dangerous city.

He's a protective father, but I should have known he would be. He's protective of me, and I'm certainly not his little girl.

His good girl, yes.

His little girl, no.

I bite down on my bottom lip, wishing Calvin didn't have to work late tonight. I'm dying to show him the proof of my book, and... well, a few other things.

Rose is already in bed, so now that Ariella is, I have the house to myself.

I walk softly down the hall away from her room. Since I have nothing pressing to do, I pause outside the room near hers that we talked about turning into Eli's room, if we ever have a boy. I push open the door and stand in the doorway, looking at the wall where I'd paint the mural.

Calvin's analogy about the alkali flies really stuck with me. It started with sketches and characters I dreamed up, but now I have an actual book—my pictures, my own story—to put between my William the hippo book ends. I have plans to write more, too. A whole series of adventures for Eli the adventurous little fly.

I keep the bookends in Eli's room right now. It acts as Ariella's play room at the moment, since we don't actually *have* Elias yet.

Not for lack of trying.

I smile faintly, thinking of all the nights Calvin and I have spent tangled in the bed sheets—or, in my case, sometimes shoved face-first into a pillow.

It's not that late, but I'm starting to get tired. I don't want to fall asleep before Calvin gets home, so I consider taking a shower.

I would have liked to do that with him—*showers with him are always fun*—but I need something to wake me up, and that might do the trick.

When I get to the bedroom, though, something feels off. I don't know how to explain it, just an energy in the room that shouldn't be there.

Calvin.

I gasp as the door closes behind me and pivot, holding up the only weapon I have—a child's hardback book—just in case it isn't him.

Leaning against the door, looking handsome as hell in his black dress slacks with his snowy white shirtsleeves rolled up and his gray tie tugged loose, Calvin says, "What, are you gonna hit me with it?"

"Maybe," I say, backing up a step even though it's him.

His prey drive kicks in, seeing an opportunity to chase me. His dark eyes glint with that dangerous heat that excites me so much, and he lunges forward, sending my heart to my toes as he grabs a handful of my hair.

I've come to crave the times he takes me like this. He's come to enjoy the times when it's tender and sweet. We've opened each other's eyes to all sorts of fun things...

I even survived the impaling machine after a particularly bratty incident. I was sore for days and had to take his cock in my battered pussy extra times anyway, but even when he makes me ache for him, I can't deny I want the twisted bastard.

Well, sometimes I do, and he likes that, too.

I lick my lips, my own eyes darkening as he backs me toward the bed.

He's not in the mood to play much tonight. He shoves me forward, unzipping and taking out his cock as he does. I'm bent over the bed at an awkward angle, but he shoves into me anyway. I claw at the soft bedding, trying to find a good grip, but we end up on the floor, me on my stomach, Calvin behind me driving into me and dominating my needy body.

When he's finished with me, we're both hot and sweaty and spread across the floor. Calvin rolls over, reaching out and pulling me in for a kiss.

Even though he's sated, it's hot. Brutal. Demanding.

Perfect.

I sigh with pleasure and snuggle up close to his chest. I'm even hotter there, but I don't care.

"Good thing I didn't take that shower," I murmur.

Calvin smiles tiredly. "You better not shower without me."

"Oh, I'm not even allowed to take my own showers anymore?" I tease.

"That's right." He reaches around to grab a handful of my ass. "And remember how bad girls get punished."

I pout up at him. "I'm not a bad girl."

I know pouting drives him crazy, so he pulls me in and kisses me harder.

"I'm so tired. If you want to fuck me again, you're going to have to do it while I'm sleeping," I joke.

"That can be arranged," he says, not joking.

I roll my eyes and push him away. "Come on, let's go take—oh! My book. I have to show you my book first."

The poor book was left abandoned on the bed after seeing things no children's book should ever see.

I sit on the edge of the mattress, and Calvin sits down beside me. Of course he has already seen all the artwork and read every page as I finished it, but he hasn't seen it all put together, and there is one page I never showed him.

"Looks great," he says, passing a hand over the cover and nodding. "I'm proud of you."

Smiling, I lean my head on his shoulder. "Thank you. Open it up."

The front inside cover has pretty paper covering it with lines and lines of my little bee character. He flips to the next page which is just the title page with *written and illustrated by Hallie Cutler* splashed across the bottom.

"That looks good," Calvin remarks.

"You would think so," I say primly.

He flips another page, and that's when he hits the dedication.

I'm antsy with anticipation. It's a simple enough dedication, but without him I never would have accomplished any of this, so I hope he likes it.

"For Calvin. You inspire me and lift me up, even when I beg you not to." I lean into him so I can point at the little winky face I typed. "Yes, I see it," he says dryly.

"Just making sure."

His gaze moves to the next line and he reads, "Thank you."

He doesn't say anything else right away, so my nerves creep up on me. "I, um... I..."

Then he turns, cradles my skull in the palm of his hand, and kisses me.

Relief flutters through me. I slide my arm around him and let him ease me back on the bed. He climbs on top of me, braces his weight on his hands and knees, then looks down at me, his dark eyes glittering with affection. “You’re welcome.”

“I can’t even imagine what my life would have looked like without you anymore,” I tell him honestly. “I know there was a time before you, but...”

He smirks. “It’s not worth remembering.”

I sigh heavily. “So arrogant.”

He smiles and leans down to kiss me. “So mine.”

“Mm, I like the sound of that,” I murmur against his lips.

“You better.”

I sigh at him again, but it gets lost as he buries his face in my neck and kisses me until everything tingles.

Finally, when my nerves can’t take much more of his teasing, he stands and offers me his hand.

I take it.

“Ready for that shower now, little dove?”

I smile. “Always, my handsome lunatic.”

THE END

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About the Author

Sam Mariano has a soft spot for the bad guys (in fiction, anyway). She loves to write edgy, twisty reads with complicated characters you're left thinking about long after you turn the last page. Her favorite thing about indie publishing is the ability to play by your own rules! If she isn't reading one of the thousands of books on her to-read list, writing her next book, or playing with her adorable daughter... actually, that's about all she has time for these days.

Feel free to find Sam on Facebook (Sam Mariano's General Reader Group), Goodreads, Twitter, or her blog—she loves hearing from readers! She's also available on Instagram now @sammarianobooks, and you can sign up for her totally-not-spammy newsletter [HERE](#)

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