



WICKED
FALLS ELITE
BOOK THREE

UNHINGED

L O V E

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UNHINGED
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UNHINGED LOVE

I hated her before I ever met her.

I hate everything about her. The sounds of her soft-spoken voice, the look in her always guarded eyes, and the way she pushes her too big glasses up her small nose. I despise it all, and now I can't get away from her.

Elliana Montego is my new stepsister, living in the room next to mine. She is there when I wake up, she's there at school, and seemingly every other place. I just can't get away from little Elli.

I guess the only thing I can do now is make sure she is as miserable as I am.

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ONE

Carter

I HATE A LOT OF THINGS, but what makes me grind my teeth the hardest is hypocrisy. People who smile to your face but wish they could stick a knife in your back. I would always rather know the truth about how somebody feels about me, and I hate pretending to like anyone I can't stand. It's a waste of time.

So why am I sitting here, forcing a smile that feels more like a grimace?

Oh, right. Because this is the first so-called family dinner with my new stepmother and her daughter.

Correction: my new gold-digger stepmother and her gold-digger freak of a daughter.

Before now, I would never have called my dad stupid. He's the chief of police, for one thing—not a position a stupid man could handle as successfully as he has. He's got a talent for seeing through people that makes him a real pain in the ass to anybody on the wrong side of the law. It's something I have always admired about him, even if I don't usually admit shit like that. Not out loud.

So why the fuck can he not see through the woman sitting across from him, laughing at his lame jokes like they're the funniest thing she's ever heard? "You are too much," she coos, batting her fake eyelashes.

Fake like her Botoxed face. Fake like her hair extensions, and her enormous cantaloupe tits. I don't think a single thing about her is real,

including her so-called feelings about Dad. The second I met her, I knew what she was in this for. She lives an expensive kind of lifestyle, and she needs a man who can support that.

How is he so blind? How can he look at her with love shining in his eyes? The dumb son of a bitch thinks she actually loves him.

If I thought he would listen, I would sit him down and tell him what he needs to hear.

But that's the thing—he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't want to. And I would end up being the bad guy who doesn't want his dad to be happy.

I do want that, I guess.

Why the fuck does it have to be with her?

"What do you think is taking Elliana so long?" Dad asks, looking toward the arched doorway that gives us a view of the hall. "I would hate for the food to get cold."

Another thing he can't see—the way his supposedly loving wife's eyes go from wide and innocent to cold and hard the second her daughter is mentioned. "I'm sure she'll be down any second. It's been a big day, moving everything in."

Dad gives her an indulgent smile. "It's been a great day. Finally, this house can be full of life."

What? Did I fill it with death? What the fuck?

He has no idea how stupid he sounds. He can't possibly.

Because if he did, he would staple his own mouth shut before turning to me and coming up with something even stupider. "Carter, why don't you go up and see if your sister needs help?"

My sister? I don't have a sister. I'm an only fucking child. Why does he have to go overboard? He has no idea how pathetic all of this is.

Irene's smile goes tight until it's about as sincere as the smile Dad told me to wear tonight so my new stepmother and stepsister would feel comfortable. "Carter doesn't need to do that," she murmurs, batting her eyelashes at me. She better be careful—one of them might fall off onto her plate if she doesn't stop. "If Elliana cannot be on time for dinner, she will eat cold food alone at the table. I'm not going to spoil her now."

Well, at least we agree on something.

We shouldn't have to sit around and wait for that weird, awkward girl who barely looked at me today when she got to the house and didn't say a word, even when Irene tried to prompt her.

Dad laughed it off—later, I heard him murmuring something to Irene about Elliana needing a little time to adjust, telling her she has all the time in the world.

This whole thing is one big joke.

“Then I guess we’ll dig in.” Dad leans over to cut a piece of lasagna from a large pan. Really, it probably doesn’t matter that we’ve waited so long—there’s still steam billowing up from it when he plates his piece, and adds sides from various cut-glass bowls arranged in the center of the table along with a huge bouquet of white roses and candles that offer flickering light.

Irene heaps salad onto her plate and barely tips the bottle of dressing to get a few drops out before setting it back in place. “I have to watch my figure if I’m going to fit into my dress, of course.” She giggles.

Why? Because it’s not bad enough that you eloped after only a few dates?

According to Dad, she deserves a big wedding—the wedding of her dreams—meaning we have to play out this embarrassing joke in front of half the town.

I’m in the middle of cutting off a square of lasagna when quick, light footsteps ring out in the hall. “Here she is,” Dad announces, wearing a broad smile that makes me feel sorry for him.

The dumb bastard.

When Elliana scurries into the room, it’s almost enough to make me lose my appetite. There I was, thinking the sloppy, shapeless clothes she wore earlier had to do with her being comfortable during the move.

Now she’s changed into something different, but still just as lumpy and oversized, with long sleeves that cover her hands. It’s eighty degrees outside, and she’s wearing a long-sleeve sweater.

That’s not the worst part. I wish I could keep myself from studying her like she’s a subject in school, but I can’t help myself. Everything I see makes me want to find something else to hate.

She wears huge glasses with thick, black frames that are way too big for her face and keep sliding down her button nose. She shoves them up over her brown eyes, which only look bigger behind her lenses. Like they’re going to swallow up her face.

Her brown hair hangs limp past her shoulder blades. Could she at least try to do something with it? Does she even bother to brush it?

“Sorry.” She barely mumbles it as she rushes into the room with her head down, shoulders up around her ears like she’s waiting for an attack, before dropping into the chair across from mine without another word. Without looking at any of us.

“I’m afraid you’re not making a very good first impression on your new family,” Irene tells her. There’s lightness in her voice, yeah, but there’s a vein of anger running underneath it.

Good. Not that I like Irene. Not that I want her here. But she needs to shake a little sense into her stuck-up daughter.

No big surprise that Dad would try to swoop in and defend her. “Now, now,” he murmurs, chuckling warmly. The generous host. The happy family man who’s finally getting laid on the regular by a woman whose pussy must be lined with gold if he’s willing to put up with her. “I’m sure Elliana is tired after such a long day. And we don’t normally adhere to a strict dinnertime around here anyway,” he tells her, winking like they’re in on the same joke now.

There is definitely a joke going on around here, but it’s not very funny.

And what does the stuck-up little bitch do? She barely bothers to look at him before muttering, “Thank you, but I should’ve been on time.”

“Do you like your room?” I can’t help but stare at her from across the table and challenge her to say something—anything. She wants to play games? She wants to pretend I’m not here? She’s going to find out pretty quick that’s not how it works. “I hope it’s big enough for you.”

After a few silent moments pass, Irene clears her throat loudly. “Your brother is talking to you.”

I want to correct her and tell her that Elliana’s brother is not talking to her—because I am not her brother—but it’s actually more fun to sit here and watch the mousy little thing squirm.

“I just want to make sure she has everything she needs,” I continue, staring daggers at her but doing everything I can to hide it. At least from the adults, who can’t stop giving each other sex eyes long enough to pay attention.

I might as well not be here. Instead of responding the way any normal, decent person would, she only lifts a shoulder under that stupid sweater before using the spatula to cut off a big slab of lasagna. It’s almost as big as mine, and I filled my plate.

“Don’t forget, you need to look good as my Maid of Honor.” Irene’s wide smile goes brittle as she stares at her daughter, who shrinks down even further. I didn’t think it was possible. She’s practically under the table.

“Oh, please.” Dad chuckles. “I wish I still had that youthful metabolism. I used to be able to eat anything and everything in front of me, and I never gained an ounce. Those were the days...”

“You humble braggart.” Irene giggles. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you and Carter are brothers.”

They’re both too busy laughing to notice what I do. Elliana rolls her eyes at her plate and lets out a soft sigh before cutting into her lasagna, taking half and pushing it to one side of her plate, then taking a bite of what’s left.

Whatever. She shouldn’t have been so greedy, anyway.

“You know what I can’t wait for?” Dad practically bats his own eyelashes the way Irene does. “Holidays. I can’t wait to celebrate our first holiday as one big family. It’s been so long since I’ve had a real family celebration.”

Okay, did I cease to exist or something? My hands tighten around the knife and fork I’m holding, and I let out a deep breath through my flared nostrils. The last thing I want to do is start a fight in front of this gold-digging bitch and her freak daughter, so I force myself to stay quiet.

What a shame that he was so fucking miserable all these years when it was just the two of us. I had no idea.

“It’s going to be so wonderful,” Irene gushes. “I’ve always dreamed of the same thing. Haven’t I, sweetheart?”

She turns to her daughter, who has yet to look up from her plate as she shovels food in like it’s her last meal. There’s a sharp movement under the table, and Elliana jolts a little. Did she get kicked? Irene only tosses her bleached waves over her shoulder, pouting her inflated lips.

“Sure,” Elliana mutters and bobs her head. “You always wanted to have big holidays.”

Yeah, and she couldn’t afford them, so she had to marry somebody who could.

This is a complete joke, but the worst part is how deliriously happy Dad looks. He’s making a fool out of himself. He’s a fucking cliché. The guy who is too blinded by pussy and a big pair of tits to see what’s happening in front of him.

This woman does not love him. She's using him, not just for money but for status. She's gone from living in a rental duplex to moving herself and the bug-eyed little freak across from me into a big, comfortable house with enormous rooms, a pool in the back, and anything anyone could want.

I'm supposed to sit here and play nice? We're supposed to pretend to be one big, happy family? It's almost enough to make me choke on my food. I don't want any part of this.

It feels like forever before we're all scraping our plates. Thank fuck. I can't wait to get away from this table. The air in here is so thick I can barely breathe. There's too much going on under the surface. The way Irene keeps staring at Elliana, who won't look up from her plate. The way Dad keeps joking around, trying to keep the mood light.

I almost want to tell him he's part of the reason everything is so tense. He's trying too hard. It's too obvious. He's only making it worse.

At least it's over. When I push my chair back from the table, ready to take my plate into the kitchen, I'm hit with a rude awakening.

"Where are you going?" Dad asks, narrowing the dark blue eyes that are so much like mine. "We haven't had dessert yet."

Fucking hell. "Since when do we have dessert together right after dinner?" I ask.

"Since we now have Irene and Elliana with us, and it's important to eat together as a family."

Isn't it nice that he cares so much about this family shit now? Not that he's ever been a bad father or anything, but we've never really been the dessert right after dinner kind of people. Most of the time, we never even have it. It's like everything has to have this big, hollow ceremony around it now. Who has time for that?

"Here, let me take that for you." Irene smiles down at Elliana, who only sits back in her chair to give her mom room to take her half-empty plate. She never did eat the rest of that lasagna.

"Eyes bigger than your stomach?" Dad asks with a chuckle. Fuck, he is so oblivious. I almost want to laugh.

Elliana murmurs something I can't hear, staring down at the table while Dad and Irene giggle their way into the kitchen like a couple of lovesick teenagers. They'll probably make out in there. It's almost enough to make me wish I hadn't eaten so much since it wants to come right back up again.

Now we're alone. The two of us.

Lucky me.

I fold my arms, staring at her, daring her to look my way.

Who does she think she is? Sitting there with that tight jaw like she's pissed off at the world? She hit the fucking jackpot—big house, respected stepfather, all the money she has probably ever wished she could get her greedy little hands on. And still, she sits there with a fucking chip on her shoulder like it's her life that's been turned upside down by this sham.

That's exactly what it is. One big sham.

"You don't get to be a gold digger and be rude at the same time."

She doesn't react to my muttered comment. It's like I never said a word. All her reaction does is up my need to get to her.

"What, your mom was so busy looking for a rich guy to support her that she didn't bother teaching you manners?" Except for the tiny shudder that moves through her, she still doesn't react.

But that got her, at least a little. I know it did. "I'm fucking talking to you." Grabbing a dinner roll from the basket between us, I hurl it straight at her head and watch it bounce off before hitting the floor.

That got her.

Her head snaps up, and I am almost salivating over the tears I know I'm going to see behind those ugly glasses.

Only there are no tears. There is nothing but cold, hard hatred, only magnified by her lenses. I'm so surprised I almost swallow my tongue.

Where does she get off looking pissed? Who does she think she is? I would ask, but Dad and Irene come back too soon. They both hold two small plates, each with a slice of cake. I'm surprised Irene will even let Elliana have one, but it's pretty thin.

"A night like this calls for a little celebration," Dad announces, turning my stomach. "And just think—in only a few weeks, we'll be cutting into a much bigger cake in front of all our family and friends."

I don't know if I should laugh or cry. The poor bastard. He's even looking forward to his public humiliation.

It's not his humiliation I care about right now. It's the humiliation of the cold little bitch across from me, who has gone back to staring down at her plate, barely picking at her cake. She has everything she could ever want, but she can't be bothered to be grateful.

It looks like she needs a lesson in gratitude. Not to mention instruction in good manners.

It just so happens I have nothing better to do than teach her.

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TWO

Elliana

WHY WON'T THIS END? What did I ever do to be tortured like this?

I don't want the cake. It looks beautiful—three layers, thick chocolate frosting—but my stomach turns at the sight of it. Really, this cake is like a symbol of my life. Now that we're living here, now that Mom is married, everything looks beautiful on the outside.

The inside? That's another story.

"This is delicious," Mom gushes, because that's all she does anymore. She gushes. Everything is the best, everything is perfect. Nothing has ever been as great as it is right now, this very minute. "What do you think, honey? This is the bakery in charge of our wedding cake."

I didn't realize she was talking to me. She never calls me *honey*. But when I get another kick under the table, I force myself to look her way. "It's good."

"I was starting to think you forgot how to talk," Carter mutters while Mom talks about cake fillings or whatever it is she's interested in.

He's a bully, and I know how to deal with bullies. It's just like trying to fight a fire: deprive it of oxygen, and it has nowhere to go. I don't know what his problem is with me, but it's nothing new. He's not even original.

"I don't know. I like a nice raspberry filling. What do you think?" Paul asks Carter, who is barely picking at his slice.

“Whatever you want. It’s your wedding.” Somehow, he manages to make that sound like a great big, fat *fuck you*.

The sharp look Paul gives him tells me he already told his idiot son to behave himself, but Carter doesn’t feel like it. He hates us, and he’s not trying to hide it. No, he wants us to know. He wants to make us as uncomfortable as he can.

The thing is, he doesn’t need to try. At least, not with me. I’m uncomfortable enough already. Every day. But especially now, when I can’t look at this bully for fear of what he’ll see in my eyes when I do. It’ll be like blood in the water. He’ll know exactly how scared I am. Not of him, especially, but of everybody.

Even Paul, and he’s at least been nice to me. He’s gone out of his way to be kind and welcoming. He wants so much for us to work as a family. But when he came too close to me a few times today while he was directing the movers, my heart stuttered, and I froze. The man was only passing by, but I almost lost it, when he’s never been anything but overly devoted to Mom’s happiness.

It’s such a shame he doesn’t understand. She’ll never really be happy. Nothing is ever enough. I’m not enough of a daughter for her. A simple courthouse wedding wasn’t enough, and she’s already thinking about redecorating the house. I don’t know if he’s aware of that yet.

But a man with all his money can afford it. That’s what Mom says, anyway. I wonder if he knows. I wonder if he would care if he did. He’s completely infatuated with her. I hope for her sake it lasts.

The sound of Carter’s fork hitting his plate startles me, and I jump a little, my heart in my throat. All he does is give me a funny sort of look while Mom laughs. “I swear, it takes nothing to make you jump. Why in the world are you so tense all the time?”

Because even that, she treats like a personal offense. Like I’m reflecting poorly on her somehow.

“First night in a new house,” Paul offers, all warm and smiling again. Like Carter, he wears his blond hair short. Unlike Carter, there’s genuine kindness in his blue eyes. “It’s not easy. But I want you to know this is your home now, and it would make me so happy if you became comfortable here. If there’s anything you need, anything at all, tell me right away, and I’ll make it happen if I can.”

How about you get your son to stop staring daggers at me like I stole something from him? I mean, he's not even subtle about it. He wants me to know he hates me. He won't stop until I know it.

No. I don't think that's enough. He wants a reaction out of me, and it's driving him crazy not to get one. Am I supposed to apologize? He's a spoiled baby who can't handle being denied. A spoiled baby with a very muscular body.

I won't dare take a glance across the table now, while he's glaring at me like I'm the human embodiment of the Black Plague, but I've gotten enough glimpses of him so far to know he's strong. Those thick arms and that broad chest tell me he spends time working out, taking care of himself. That doesn't give me a lot of confidence, since I can't even do a pull-up, much less fight off somebody so much bigger than me. He's got at least a foot on me in height, too.

But he wouldn't try to hurt me physically... would he?

Who am I kidding? I know exactly how far people will go if it means breaking an innocent person's spirit. And he seems like just the kind of person who would consider breaking my spirit a sport.

Something tells me he won't quit until he's crowned champion.

That's why I excuse myself from the table the second I finish the cake that tastes like cotton in my mouth. Whatever it takes to get away from this table and the entire ugly charade being played out here.

I will not let you ruin this for me—my loving mother's final words as we pulled up in front of the house earlier today with a moving van behind us. *You had better start learning how to be a normal person, and fast, because I am not going to help you. This is my time! Do you hear me?*

I heard her loud and clear. Was I supposed to be surprised? She has done everything she can to separate herself from me over the years. The criticism, the disdain. There are times I think it will drown me. I couldn't even tell her about what I went through in high school.

Don't think about that now.

Too late. Being around that spoiled, snobby bully brings it all back.

Not now. Later. I have to force myself to push the memories aside—if only so Paul doesn't hold me up by asking if everything's okay. I know everything I'm thinking shows on my face.

I just want to get to my room, where I can be alone.

I should know by now it isn't that easy.

"I think I'll head up and finish a little homework," Carter announces as he gets up from the table. "Gotta pull the grades, right?"

There's something about the way Paul's head cocks to the side that tells me he sees through this bullshit excuse. I doubt Carter is big on studying. People like him never are. "See if Elliana needs help with anything up there. Maybe taking suitcases up to the attic?" he asks me.

Does he notice the ripple of tension that runs through his son? Maybe he does notice but doesn't care. The man is determined to force this family thing down everybody's throats. It's nice of him, but he's trying too hard. I wish I could tell him not to bother.

But how can I do that when I can't get up the courage to tell him I will be fine getting my room straightened out and don't need any help? Scared of my own shadow—something Mom has accused me of too many times. Not that she's wrong. I wish she was.

If I refuse now, I'll only look ungrateful. That, plus Mom's sharp, unforgiving look, means I duck my head and start out for the stairs. Carter's heavy footsteps follow behind me, and every step pairs with an angry grunt. He's trying to send a message. *This is my home, and you don't belong here.* He might as well tattoo it across his forehead.

I wonder if he'd believe me if I told him I don't want to be here any more than he wants me here. I would rather go back to living in a house a fraction of the size, so long as it meant not having to interact—being forced into this new family dynamic. I never asked for this. Will he believe me?

And why do I care? Maybe it would be nice to take him down a peg or two and show him he doesn't know half of what he thinks he knows.

"Taking your suitcases up to the attic," Carter mutters behind me in a dark, menacing tone. "I'd rather help you pack everything back up. You don't belong here."

He's right. I don't. I don't belong anywhere. *Please, let this be over soon.* With my arms wrapped around me, I reach the top of the stairs, then turn left. There are so many rooms up here, and until now, only two men lived in this house. So much empty space.

Yet with so many choices, Carter's room is directly across the hall. I'm sure Paul chose this room for me because it was so close to Carter's, like he wants us to have an excuse to run into each other all the time or something. He has good intentions, but they're not helping me as we come to a stop outside the bedroom.

Carter only glances through the open door before rolling his eyes. “You’ve not even finished unpacking yet? What the fuck? Why didn’t you just say that downstairs?”

Nothing gets past you, genius. If only I had the courage to say that out loud. He deserves to hear it—and so much more. Something tells me there are a lot of things he needs to hear, the sort of things nobody has ever had the courage to tell him.

It’s a shame I don’t have the courage, either. Who am I kidding? I can’t look at him. Instead, I stare at the floor, studying the pattern of the wood in front of my feet.

He grunts, then pushes his way past me, even though there is plenty of room. “You probably don’t even have enough shit to make it look like anybody’s living in here,” he mutters in disgust. Is that supposed to be an insult?

Going to the bed, he picks up a corner of the duvet between his thumb and forefinger before flinging it aside. “Cheap. Guess Mom was too busy buying her new tits to get you decent bedding.”

Ignore him. He’s not worth it. I don’t know why he’s determined to get a rise out of me, but I’ll be damned if I make it easy for him. Is it enough that I have no comeback? I have nothing to say. No defense. He’s already won.

Why is that not good enough? My heart wants to burst out of my chest when he moves toward me. All I can do is back away until I end up in the corner, trapped. Since I don’t have it in me to look at him, I can only go by his snickering to tell how he feels about this while his arms cage me in, his palms against the wall.

I can’t take this. It’s too much. What did I ever do to him besides exist? The words are right there on the tip of my tongue, but something is holding them back.

“What the fuck is your problem?” His hot breath fans across my face—it smells like garlic and chocolate. Not the best combination, but it’s something to focus on beyond the absolute hatred dripping from his voice. “What makes you so much better than me? Too good to say anything? Too good to even look at me?”

“And there’s my dad,” he continues, making me jump when he slams his palm against the wall inches from my head. “Bending over backward to make sure you’re happy and comfortable, and you can’t even bother to look at him, either. What makes you so much better than us?”

Don't do it. The tears stinging behind my eyes are the last thing I want to feel right now. I cannot give him the satisfaction of making me cry. I don't have much, but I can at least keep a little of my dignity.

"Maybe that's not it." His words take on a softer edge, but it's no less threatening, like the gentle hiss of a snake that could strike at any second. "Maybe you're hiding something. Is that it? What, are you two a couple of grifters or some shit? Huh?"

When all I do is stare at my feet, he cranes his neck, trying desperately to make me lift my head to look at him. "Maybe I'm gonna make it my one goal to find out what you're hiding. What do you think about that? Huh?"

He's nothing. He's not even here. This can't last forever. Once he gets tired of me, he'll go away.

"Fucking freak." He slams his hand into the wall again and growls when I don't react. I'm too far away now. I can't hear him. He's nothing. He's nobody.

When he shoves himself away from the wall with a grunt and leaves the room, I can breathe. The tension holding my body together melts away all at once, and I have to lean against the corner while I slide down to the floor. My legs are too weak to hold me up now.

But before he can come back, I manage to close the door, then reach up to flip the lock. The sound is like a pin piercing a balloon, and now whatever was keeping my panic locked away is gone.

Breathe. In. Out. I'm not dying. This is not going to kill me. It's a panic attack, that's all. My heart isn't going to burst out of my chest, even if that's how it feels. The cold sweat along the back of my neck will go away. I'll be okay. I'll get through this. One breath at a time.

I'm safe. Closing my eyes, I rest my head against the door and return to my slow, measured breathing. I'm safe. Nothing's going to hurt me. I have to force myself to tune into the feeling of the floor under me, the door at my back. They're both sturdy and cool, and they're supporting me. I am supported. I am safe.

It feels like it takes forever for my heartbeat to slow down a little. It doesn't hurt so much in my chest once I slowly open my eyes again to gaze at the room that's mine as of today. To distract my brain, I study everything slowly, one thing at a time. The big, four-poster bed that does make my comforter look cheap. The pair of windows that look out over one side of the property with its emerald-green lawn. Not a weed in sight out there.

Another huge difference from the neighborhood we've just moved from. That was more weeds than grass on the tiny strips of lawn in front of each house.

The closet is ten times bigger than I'll ever need. I'm pretty sure it's bigger than my old bedroom. Mom's first words when she took a look at it ring in my head. "*Finally, I can afford to start dressing you the way a girl should dress.*" Right, because that's all that matters. Not whether I want to wear the clothes she thinks will look good on me. It's amazing she can manage to look at me at all, since I'm so completely wrong in every way.

No, I'm not thinking about that right now. I'm trying to calm myself down, not send myself into another panic attack as I imagine being dragged from store to store, forced to try on clothes I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving the house in. Having every inch of me poked and prodded and criticized. That's future stuff, anyway. It's not happening now. I have to focus on the present.

The bathroom door sits diagonally from where I'm curled up on the floor with my knees pulled up to my chest. That's one positive in all of this, having my own bathroom where there will be room for my things and not just Mom's. I need to look for whatever little bit of happiness I can get out of this situation.

Finally, I'm myself again. I can push myself up from the shiny floor and go to the dresser to pull out a pair of pajamas. After the day I've had, all I want is to sleep. Not only because my body is tired after the crazy rush of last-minute packing. It's my only escape. My dreams are the only place where I can be myself. Where I don't have to be afraid to catch the wrong person's eye or breathe too hard or attract attention in any other way. I don't constantly feel like I'm under attack.

The way I feel right now. It's been a while since Carter left, and I haven't heard anything from him outside the locked door, but that doesn't mean he's not planning something. He won't stop until he breaks me down and watches me crumble.

Just another thing to hate him for. When I crawl into bed, what should be comforting is anything but. What if he decides to come back? What if he has a key? Of course he would. This is his house. I'm sure he could find it if he wanted to. The dresser sits against the wall, close to the door, but it's way too big for me to think about sliding over to block his entrance.

Meaning all I can do is lie in bed and stare at the door while the lamp on the nightstand glows. He might not come in tonight, but I need to be ready, just in case he does.

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THREE

Carter

FAMILY DINNERS AREN'T bad enough. Now we have to have family breakfast, too. Pretty soon we'll be wearing matching clothes.

"Big day for you." I've never seen anyone try to force a smile on somebody else until now, watching Dad aim his smile at Elliana like a weapon. I believe his heart's in the right place. It's his brain I'm worried about. "First day of classes at a new school."

"One thing I've never had to worry about is Elliana's grades." Wow. It almost sounds like Irene is trying to compliment her daughter. That can't be right. Since everything has to be about her.

"I'm sure with Carter to show you around, you won't have any problem meeting new people and making friends." Dad is too busy winking at Irene like he's trying to reassure her to see my mouth falling open. What is it with him making promises for me, deciding what I'm going to do, what will or will not be a problem? The fuck? It's like he's had a personality transplant.

"I'm not sure I should." Putting butter on a piece of toast gives me something to do with my hands other than letting them shake with rage. When I end up tearing the bread because I'm pressing too hard, I have to set the whole thing down on my plate.

"Why not?" There's an edge to his question. It makes me lift my gaze to meet his from across the round table in the kitchen's breakfast nook. The sunshine streaming in through the window to his left makes his eyes

sparkle, but there's nothing cheerful in them. "Are you so busy you can't introduce your stepsister to your friends?"

At least he's only calling her my stepsister this time. Maybe he finally figured out he was taking things too far. "It's not that I'm busy. But..."

I have to ask. And since the girl we're talking about is staring at her plate like it's the most interesting thing she's ever seen instead of speaking up for herself or even participating, I'm the only one who's going to point this out. "Is that what she wants? For me to introduce her around? Maybe we should find that out first."

He doesn't blink before asking, "Why wouldn't she want that?"

Jesus Christ. He's either trying his damnedest to be oblivious, or he really has lost his mind. I'm not even sure anymore.

"Forget it. Whatever." I shouldn't have said anything. He doesn't get it. He refuses to.

Obviously, Irene isn't cool with the fact that Dad has stopped paying attention to her for an entire thirty seconds. She leans across the table, tits ready to fall out of her low-cut shirt, to tap her obnoxious fingernails against his arm. I don't know how she manages to do anything with nails that long. "Did you tell Carter yet?"

I swear to God, if she's pregnant, I will flip this fucking table.

Dad's face brightens right away. "We're going on a little trip this coming weekend, the two of us," he explains. "I expect you to be on your best behavior while we're gone."

An entire weekend where I won't have to breathe the same air as the gold-digging whore? The day is finally starting to look up, even if it makes me sick to think of how soon she'll be spending more of Dad's money when she did nothing to earn it. It's one thing for him to support me—I'm his son, and I'm not walking around asking for elaborate weddings and expensive trips.

"Have a good time," I murmur, forcing a tiny grin before finishing my food. I need to get out of here before I say something I can't take back. If there's one thing I won't accept, it's letting a couple of gold diggers ruin my family. And no matter what Dad says, we were a family before he met Irene.

I'm on my way to the sink with my plate when Dad speaks behind me. "I guess you'll need a ride to school." He's not talking to me. I have a car.

A look over my shoulder tells me the freak only nods with her shoulders up around her ears. It's like she's always in the middle of flinching. What the fuck is she flinching away from? Disgust is flowing through my veins like the water flowing over my plate before I leave it in the dishwasher—one of the few chores I have to do around here.

"Carter will drive you." I close my eyes and grit my teeth, facing away from them while Dad once again offers my services without asking first.

"That would be so sweet." Irene simpers. Lucky me, turning around just in time to watch her stretch her body across the table to give him a big, sloppy kiss.

I might throw up here and now.

After clearing my throat to remind them they aren't alone in the room, I grunt, "I'm ready to go." My backpack is waiting by the front door, so after a quick nod to everyone, I head that way. If the girl wants to get to school, she'll follow.

"Carter." Dad catches me in the hall outside the kitchen, and I stop, rolling my eyes at the ceiling before turning his way. He holds a finger to his lips before jerking his head toward the dining room, then looks behind him to make sure Irene isn't lurking before joining me by the table.

"Before you start on me, I'm doing my best," I whisper, jamming my hands into the pockets of my shorts since he won't like it much if he sees the way they keep curling into fists.

"That's your best? Acting like a spoiled brat back there? I tried to let it go last night, but I can't let you continue this way." He looks like a bull ready to charge when he lowers his brow and grunts, "We are going to be a solid family unit."

It can't be forced. Right. Like he would listen if I told him. "You're pushing too hard on her," I whisper. Is she near the room? I hope she is. I want her to hear this. "She's scared of everything. She won't talk. She won't even look at us. And the more you try to push her out of her shell or whatever it is, the harder she'll fight to stay in it."

"The only way to get her out of her shell is to make sure she knows she's safe here." He looks toward the hall too, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Irene said something about her having trouble years back, but that's really all she said. After that, she can't face people."

"Who hasn't had trouble? Like I said, you can't force her. I'm not going to. It's a waste of time."

His jaw tightens in a way that tells me he's fighting as hard as I am to keep a cool head. "You will be kind to her. You will make her feel welcome, and that is all there is to it. Do we understand each other?"

I understand him. It's a shame he can't be bothered to understand me. "Gotcha." I can't hide my irritation—not that I try very hard, either—rolling my eyes as I leave the room.

He's quick for a guy his age, taking hold of my arm. His hand is like an iron claw. "Lose the attitude," he warns. "I need you to go along with me on this. It matters to me. Is that not enough?"

"I told you, I've got it." He will beat a dead horse until it's nothing but pink mist. Like somewhere along the way, he got the idea that the more he talks, the more people will take him seriously. It doesn't matter that he drove a point home already. He needs to keep going until he gets whatever reaction he's waiting for.

One thing is for sure by the time he decides it's safe to release me: I am in no fucking mood to chat up my new stepsister. At least Wren and Maya are nice and friendly. They'll probably take her under their wing. Better them than me.

The mousy little freak is waiting at the front door with her backpack slung over her shoulder. She grips the strap in one fist, clenched so tight her hand shakes as I approach. Should I say something kind, something to reassure her? Would she listen if I did? It's not worth the breath.

Still, it's around fifteen minutes to school, and fifteen minutes is a long time to spend in silence. We are only at the end of the block with her practically hugging the passenger side door of my truck before I offer, "My friends Briggs and Tucker have girlfriends I can introduce you to." I glance at her. "They're nice girls."

I'm looking through the windshield but can see her from the corner of my eye, so I'm treated to the sight of her shoulders lifting further than ever. What the fuck? "Most of the time we end up getting together for lunch if our schedules are free, but today they were planning on having breakfast together. You could meet them," I suggest.

Maybe I would get a reaction if I threatened to drive headfirst into the concrete divider put in place for the road crew repaving part of the street we're rolling down. Maybe I would have to go through with crashing.

By the time I'm waiting for passing traffic to clear so I can turn into the parking lot, I have to tell myself at least I tried. She is fucking determined

to shut me out. I'm tired of talking to myself.

The parking lot is already halfway full by the time I pull into a spot close to a grassy stretch where handfuls of students are hanging out—sitting around, tossing a football, taking selfies in the sunshine.

She couldn't be more unlike them. Before putting the car in park, I watch her watching them, staring out through those ugly glasses that take up so much of her face. Like she's from another planet, studying alien life forms.

"Do you wanna come with me? Come and meet my friends?" I don't know why, but I feel like I have to give her one more chance. Maybe it's my way of reminding myself there's only so much I can do.

Does she say a word? Does she acknowledge me? Why would she? I'm just the asshole who drove her to school. Without a word, she unbuckles her belt, opens the door, and leaves with her backpack slung over her shoulder. The shapeless sweater and baggy jeans she's wearing attract a little attention from some of the people she passes, who probably all wonder why somebody's grandma is going to school here. Doesn't it matter that she looks like a joke? How can she not care?

Not my problem. No matter what Dad says, she's in charge of herself, not me. If she wants to be strange and ignore any attempt at kindness, she can fuck right off.

If anything, I'm glad she hurried off like the rude little freak she is. I don't have to walk around with her now as I head across campus toward the cafeteria, where Briggs and the rest of them planned on having breakfast together today. Family breakfast meant I had to bow out. Another reason to be irritated. But I've wasted enough time on that today. I've wasted enough brain power on the ungrateful girl I'm now related to legally, if in no other way. But that's more than enough.

I only have around twenty minutes until class starts, but I go to the cafeteria anyway, hoping to clear my head by bullshitting with friends—like a palate cleanser, only for my brain. I don't have to look hard for them. Kellen's presence makes the group stand out since, even while he's sitting down, he's a solid head taller than anybody else around him. He's a good guy to have around in a crowd. Like a beacon.

"Hey!" Wren lifts a hand to wave. She's always the first one to be welcoming, which makes me feel kind of shitty, considering how I used to

treat her. That was all because it was what Briggs wanted before things changed between them.

Preston and Easton are sitting with their backs to me and turn in unison to look for whoever Wren noticed. “Oh, it’s just him,” Easton mutters, elbowing his twin before I walk past and slap him upside the back of the head.

“Your manners are shit,” I grunt, making everyone else laugh.

“Starting off with violence this early in the day?” Easton winces and rubs the back of his head, even though I barely grazed him. “Who pissed in your cereal this morning?”

Elliana might not literally have pissed, but she might as well have. I ignore his question, sitting next to Kellen and returning the fist bump he offers. He never says much.

Maya is practically glued to Tucker, sitting with her head on his shoulder. He’s trying to play it off like it doesn’t matter, but I can tell he’s loving it. He’s practically glowing with pride. And to think, he used to hate her as much as Briggs hated Wren. I don’t get it.

Once it’s clear I’m alone, she picks her head up and cranes her neck to look around. “Where is she?”

“Where is who?” Because sometimes it’s easier to play dumb.

“The Queen of England,” Wren mutters, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, didn’t she die?” It’s obvious the girls aren’t impressed with my lame attempt at humor. They both give me a withering look.

“For real, though.” Briggs can’t help but chuckle behind Wren’s head. At least he’s not the kind of boyfriend who orders his friends to apologize for the littlest things. “I thought she and her mom were moving in yesterday.”

“They did.” Is there anywhere on campus I can go without having to be reminded of her?

“Did she come to school with you? I was really hoping to meet her,” Maya says.

“Yeah, well...” Am I going to sound like a complete prick if I come out with the truth? Do I care? These people know me well enough that I don’t have to pretend to be a nicer person than I am. “Don’t waste your time.”

The way the girls gasp at the same time, you’d think they’re the twins at the table. “How come?” If I didn’t know better, I’d think Wren was about to cry. She’s that upset. Is she for real?

“She is...” A complete and total pain in the ass. A fucking freak. “Really shy. Like, I think it causes her actual pain to have to talk to people.”

Right away, the girls brighten up. “Oh, we can get her out of her shell in no time,” Maya insists with a wink.

“I’m just saying, don’t get your hopes up. Really, I’m not trying to be a dick,” I insist when the look the girls exchange tells me that’s exactly what they think I’m doing. “Did you ever hear about something being so tough it feels like you’re pulling teeth? Welcome to my world. I tried to talk to her last night at dinner, this morning at breakfast, in the car on the way here. Not a word.”

Since that is about as nice as I can be, I leave it there. Otherwise, I might have to tell them about her ugly clothes and the glasses that make her eyes bug out.

Tucker rubs his jaw, frowning. “From the way you describe your stepmom, she’s basically the opposite.”

My stepmom. “Don’t use disgusting language like that in front of me,” I warn. Everybody laughs, but I’m not joking. “She’s nothing but a gold digger.”

“I’m sure her daughter isn’t,” Wren reminds me. “From the way you make it sound, she just needs friends. I remember how that felt.”

“Same here,” Maya agrees.

“Hey, if you can get through to her, be my guest. You’ll know her by the cable knit sweater she’s wearing on an eighty-degree day and... what do they call them? Coke-bottle glasses?” Making circles with my forefingers and thumbs, I hold them over my eyes. “They’re like magnifying lenses.”

“Stop,” Preston murmurs with a smirk. “You’re getting me too horny.”

“A gentle breeze would get you horny.” He doesn’t bother arguing my point. “But like I said, if you can help out, I’d appreciate it. Dad is dead set on us being some TV sitcom family.”

“The poor girl just needs a little time to get out of her shell.” Wren looks up at the clock hanging over the double doors and grimaces. “Shit, I’m running late. I’ve gotta go.”

“Don’t forget,” Maya says with a snicker as she stands. “You’re a guy. There are things about girls a guy will never understand.”

I don’t even bother telling her she’s wrong. I’ve already used up all my patience when it comes to Elliana this morning. “If you can crack the code, be my guest. One less thing for me to think about.” Then I haul ass outside

and head straight for the sciences building, where my Psych class is held. At least while I'm here, I don't have to walk on eggshells around Princess Freak.

The only reason I didn't go into deeper detail about her and how rude and ignorant she is was knowing I'd only get my balls busted by the guys. Considering they're still a little tender from all the shit Dad gave me earlier, I'm not in the mood.

The lecture hall is dark and cool and already filling up by the time I arrive with a few minutes to spare. I snag a seat toward the back of the room and glance around to see how many people I recognize. After jerking my chin to acknowledge a few of them, I pull out my MacBook and set it up on the counter running the length of the row.

A high-pitched giggle catches my attention—I look that way out of reflex, more than actually caring who made the sound or why. That's how it is. You hear an unexpected noise, and you look around to see what's happening.

What do I see? I see who the girl giggled at.

A certain bug-eyed, limp-haired, sweater-wearing freak who takes an empty seat at the opposite end of my row without looking up from her shoes.

Fuck me. Is there anywhere on campus I'll be able to go and avoid her?

Now more than a few people have noticed not only her bizarre fashion sense but the way she holds herself, with her hair hanging around her face. If she's going to always stare at her feet, she needs to get a pair of glasses that actually fit, since they keep sliding down until she pushes them back up the bridge of her nose.

What did I ever do to deserve this? And what happens once word gets around that she's part of my family? I don't want to be associated with her.

Right now, it looks like I don't have much say in anything.

Like I needed another reason to hate her guts.

FOUR

Elliana

IT'S ALMOST OVER. All I have to do is sit through the drive home with Carter, and then I can hide in my room and decompress.

That's the only thought keeping me going as I cross campus, doing everything I can to avoid the gazes of strangers who seem to think they know me. Carter called me rude? Somebody needs to talk to these people about how they have no problem openly staring at someone, snickering—the whole nine yards. That is rude. Not to mention totally unnecessary. What have I ever done to them?

What have I ever done to him? The child. The spoiled, self-centered infant. He can't stand someone not immediately bowing down and kissing his feet just because he decided they were worthy of a conversation, so he has to lash out and act like a prick. The only reason he was nice to me this morning was to make his dad happy, obviously.

When I didn't play along, it only irked him worse than ever. Poor baby. I hope his friends soothe his bruised ego.

I can't believe he has any friends. But then, if everyone else at school is as mean and unoriginal as the people I've run into so far today, I guess there's a chance. These people have nothing better to do than go out of their way to make someone feel less-than. Whatever happened to people minding their own business?

I've reached the parking lot when the sight of two girls hanging out near Carter's black truck makes me slow down. The impulse to back away is almost too tempting. Maybe I can get out of here before they notice me. Even if they're only hanging out to say hi to Carter again—I'd rather swallow my own tongue, but there's no accounting for taste—I can't imagine they would be much nicer than anybody else has been today. I walk slowly the rest of the way, passing one car after another, hoping they will leave before I reach them.

As if my luck has ever gone that way. The curly-haired blonde girl notices me first, nudging her friend before murmuring something that makes her look my way over the roofs of the cars between us. I can't tell if they're grinning to be friendly or because they're looking forward to being bitches. Since I'm not sure what they're all about, I stick to giving them a short nod before reaching them. Even then, I leave a little space between us.

"Hi. Are you Elliana?" The girl with the curly hair gives me a wave since we are too far apart to shake hands. "I'm Maya, and this is Wren. We're friends of Carter's."

I'm sorry to hear that. I do my best to give them a tiny smile, and even that is almost painful. I'm out of practice.

"How was your first day of class?" Wren asks. She has big, hopeful eyes that shine my way. Are they for real? Is this a big setup?

What I wouldn't give to be able to take them at face value, to believe they have good intentions. But if they're friends with Carter, they can't be much different than he is, right? For all I know, he put them up to it, either to get me off his hands or to make me even more miserable. Either way, I am not in the mood.

I really wish they would stop looking at me the way they are, staring at me like it actually matters whether or not I say anything. I can't imagine they honestly care. Why would they? Since it's pretty clear they expect something from me and they're not going to stop until they get it, I lift a shoulder while shifting my backpack. "It was fine."

Please, God, let this stop.

"Great. What do you have this semester?" Maya asks.

Did I die? Is this hell? "Oh, today I had Psych, Calculus, and Literature."

"That's a pretty long day," Wren muses. When I sneak a glance at her from under my lashes, she looks sympathetic. "Why don't you come out

with us and unwind a little?”

“Yeah!” Maya agrees enthusiastically. “We could go grab an iced coffee in town, maybe walk around a little, show you where things are?”

“Because you’re not from around here, are you?” Wren prompts. “I remember Carter saying something about you and your mom being from out of town.”

I’m sure that’s not all he said. I’m sure he has plenty of opinions. Just the thought of him makes my face go hot, though my sweater isn’t really helping things either. Pushing up the sleeves, I fight to find something to say. I have to fight for every word as it is—I’m always sure that whatever I choose will be the wrong thing. You would think enough years pass for a person to start forgetting being laughed at every time they open their mouth in class, but you would be wrong.

I still hear every snicker and laugh. I still see every dirty look. If I went to high school with these girls, they would be whispering about me right now, their heads bent together, hands in front of their faces. Like that makes it any easier to be laughed at.

“Really, I have to finish unpacking,” I tell them, which isn’t really a lie.

“Oh. Okay. Maybe next time,” Wren offers after her face falls.

She can’t be for real. There’s no way. Nobody is actually this nice on purpose. They can’t possibly be disappointed that some stranger won’t go window shopping with them over iced coffee.

No, they’re probably disappointed they won’t have a chance to be mean. Like that bread roll Carter threw at my head last night. The prick.

I look up from my scuffed trainers in time to see Wren nudge Maya, nodding at something behind me. “Here comes Carter. I guess we’ll let you guys go home. It was really nice to meet you,” Wren adds.

I wish I could believe her. It’s almost shocking how much I wish I could believe her. Why don’t I get to be normal like everybody else? Why do I have to carry all these ugly, humiliating memories with me everywhere I go?

“Hey, girls.” Since I’m not looking up, I can’t see whether Carter exchanges anything beyond a glance with the two of them. Really, I don’t want to see. I don’t think I could handle it if either of them rolled their eyes or smirked.

It’s not often I want to believe somebody has good intentions, but I really want to believe they do.

Of course, I'll only end up getting my heart crushed when it turns out they're no better than Carter or any of the countless kids who made my life a living hell all through high school.

Especially the ones who decided to give me a swimming lesson one night.

Carter passes me on the way to the driver's side door, and his brief nearness makes me shudder. I shouldn't think about that now—not around him. Not around anyone. If the memories are going to come, they should come while I'm alone, so nobody sees how freaked I am.

Especially Carter, who doesn't need any more excuses to bully me.

At least this time, he doesn't bother trying to make conversation. It feels almost miraculous to pass the drive in silence. I just need to get home. I need to be alone and recharge my battery a little after spending hours around so many people. It's exhausting, but it's not like I can explain it to anybody. Nobody would listen, for one thing. Mom sure wouldn't. She never has, even when I tried to tell her what happened that night. I thought I was dying, but all she could do after I tearfully poured my heart out was tell me to stop being so dramatic. Any illusions I still held onto about her being a caring mother vanished in smoke.

It's a relief to pull into the driveway. Obviously, meeting Maya and Wren unsettled me more than I realize, since the sweat on my palm makes opening the door a challenge. Carter is already opening the front door and sailing through by the time I jog up the wide front steps. I'm surprised he doesn't try to close it behind him and shut me out.

Was I hoping for a little peace and quiet today on my return? I was planning on running straight up to my room without saying a word to Mom.

As soon as we're inside, it's obvious I'm not going to get the chance.

"There you are! I was starting to wonder if you would ever get home." Mom shakes her head as she emerges from the living room, where a handful of people are chatting, taking notes on tablets, and examining a stack of fabric swatches in different colors. "I told you the wedding planners were coming today, remember?"

I'm sure if Carter wasn't standing only a few feet away, she would add a biting remark about how I never remember the important things; how my head is always in the clouds, and how she basically wishes I didn't have to be a part of the wedding in the first place. But she and Paul are still in the

honeymoon phase, meaning she can't show her true colors yet. At least, not until she gets the big, splashy public wedding of her dreams.

"I came home right after class." I glance toward Carter before I can help myself—he can back me up. But will he? No. He doesn't say a word, only scoffing as he stares into the living room. No need to ask how he feels about all of this.

Either her head is too far up her liposuctioned ass to notice, or she knows it's safer to overlook his attitude. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she heaves a sigh. "Well, you're here now. I'm still not completely settled on the color of your dress. There are some fabric swatches in here that I'd like to hold up next to your face to see how they go with your coloring." She's still rambling on as she takes my wrist and almost drags me into the room. Carter, of course, doesn't follow.

Will she ever get tired of humiliating me?

"How was your first day? Please tell me you made some friends." She grabs a few swatches and holds them up next to me, scowling at every one. "Honestly, you're the only person I've ever met who doesn't look good in anything. Could you at least try? Put on a little mascara, a little eyeshadow. You might actually start looking like a human being instead of a zombie straight from the grave. At least this wedding will be a reason for you to wear something other than these ugly, shapeless clothes you insist on wrapping yourself in."

Who needs to go outside to be bullied when I can just stay home and let Mom do it?

"I mean, you must be sweltering," she frets, clicking her tongue and wrinkling her nose. Because, of course, anybody who doesn't walk around with their boobs hanging out the way she does must have something wrong with them.

I am so tired of this. Tired of being her daughter. I've never been good enough. She doesn't even try to understand why I dress the way I do. Why I want nothing more than to fade into the background—to go unnoticed. Why bother understanding when it's so much easier to simply disapprove?

Before she pries any deeper into how my day went and whether I met anybody nice, one of the women beckons her. "What do you think about these floral arrangements? You were talking about an archway to stand under when you exchange vows, right?"

I don't know the woman, but I'm grateful to her. She just saved me from having to suffer through what I know would be disappointment verging on anger from dear old Mom. Now that her attention has been stolen away, she forgets all about the right colors for me and discusses hydrangeas versus roses.

Which is my cue to get the hell out of here before she remembers I'm around. When Mom's not looking, I duck out of the room on tiptoes, then jog over to the stairs and take them two at a time, desperate for solace. I feel beaten and bruised. Is this how it's going to be every day? Why can't I take online classes? Nobody would miss me. Why can't I just disappear?

Probably for the same reason I can't avoid Carter: my luck has never been very good. Once I reach the top of the stairs, his snide voice assaults me. "You know, your mom might be a gold digger, but there's one thing we can agree on."

He's leaning in the doorway to his bedroom, arms folded as he follows my progress up the hall. I pin my gaze to the floor, refusing to give him the reaction he's so clearly going for. Snorting, he adds, "Your clothes are hideous."

Because I needed that last little kick in the teeth to put a bow on this gift of a day. The first of so many days. An endless string of them filled with nothing but anxiety and fear.

And maybe a little bit of envy.

Because deep down inside, I wish I could be normal. I just wouldn't know where to start.

FIVE

Carter

AS USUAL, it's not bad enough that I'm being forced to do something, like living with a pair of strangers who have no business being here as far as I'm concerned. I have to take meals with them, too. At least Dad took Irene out for breakfast this morning, meaning I'm off the hook. Small miracles.

It's not bad enough Elliana lives under this roof. I have to see her in Psych class, too, like there's a spotlight on her, pointing out how different she is from normal people.

It's not bad enough I have to drive her to and from school. No, she has to keep me waiting. We should've been out of here five minutes ago, but I'm still the only person down here, waiting by the front door. This is beyond stupid. She's not satisfied with having a chauffeur? She has to make sure I know we move according to her schedule, too?

Fuck this. I am nobody's servant. I'm not going to be late for class because of her. As it is, I'll probably have to park a mile away from the liberal arts building where my first class is held. I'll probably have to sprint across the lot to make it in time.

The girl is determined to insert herself into every aspect of my life and make it a little worse than it was before. She'll learn today about being on time. She wants a favor? She follows my schedule. She doesn't get to move into my house and dictate the rules.

It's nice driving on my own. I mean, I'm just as silent now as I would be if she were in the passenger seat, but at least there isn't that strange discomfort in the air. Like I'm Jack the Ripper and she wants to open the door in the middle of the road and jump out for fear of what I might do.

A growl stirs in my throat and fills the truck. What am I doing, thinking about her?

At the end of the block, I pull up a playlist and turn on something loud and bass-heavy. Soon, the whole truck is vibrating in a satisfying way. It's almost as good for relieving my tension as a solid workout or a good fuck.

Great. Now I'm thinking about fucking while my stepsister is close to the front of my mind. Pretty fucking disgusting.

I wonder what would happen if a guy ever approached her for sex. Granted, he would have to be the most hard-up guy in existence—and probably blind—but I'm sure there's somebody desperate enough. I doubt they would get too far; she would probably lie there like a corpse. I doubt she could even get up the courage to scream. Would she keep her lumpy sweater on the whole time?

I really need to stop thinking about this.

When the music cuts out all at once, the sudden difference shakes me out of my nauseating train of thought. A moment passes before my phone rings, hooked up to the truck's Bluetooth. The word DAD flashes across the control panel on the dashboard.

A chill touches my skin before I answer. "You know you don't like me talking on the phone while I'm driving," I remind him, only half joking.

He's not in the mood for banter. "You wanna tell me why I got a call from your stepsister, telling me she needs a ride to school?"

The little bitch.

"Good thing we were already on the way home," he continues. "I'll do it today because the girl needs to get to school somehow. But this is the last time I do you a favor."

"How are you doing me a favor? I didn't know it was my job to get her where she needs to be."

"You are going to the same place. It's the least you can do."

"Then the least she can do is be ready on time and waiting for me when we need to leave," I fire back. "I waited for her."

"Did you? How long did you wait?"

"I didn't have my stopwatch in hand, but it was at least five minutes."

“Wow, five entire minutes?” He blows out a high-pitched whistle that sets my teeth on edge. “I hope the entire rest of your day hasn’t been thrown off schedule.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he almost barks in my ear when I try to defend myself. “You are going to stop acting like a petty child. You are going to be a functioning member of this family. And every day, you will make sure your stepsister gets to school and back again. Do you understand me? This is not a negotiation. This is your father telling you what you are going to do if you expect to continue living under this roof—and I don’t think it’s much to ask,” he adds.

I should never have answered my phone, especially not while I’m trying to drive without killing everyone in front of me. I can barely see straight through the fog of growing rage.

I can put up with a lot of shit. One thing I’ve never been able to take is being forced into something I don’t want to do. It’s bad enough I have to accept the gold digger and her freak offspring as members of my family—the idea makes me want to gag.

Now I have no choice but to fall in line if I want to stay in my own home. My home. Not Irene’s. Not Elliana’s.

“Is that all?” It’s only going to piss him off worse, but I can’t sit here and take this without making sure he knows how pissed I am. What the fuck is so special about her that I have to wait around until she decides it’s time for us to go to school? If he loves her so much, why doesn’t he buy her a car? Then I would only be forced to see her in Psych and around the table at home. I could almost deal with that. It’s this being forced bullshit that makes me grind my molars before slamming the heel of my hand against the horn when the car in front of me waits too long after the light turns green.

“You are on thin ice,” he warns before ending the call. Music floods the truck’s cab again, but it doesn’t ease my tension this time. Nothing could.

I practically had to bite my tongue off to keep from reminding him I’m not some punk he dragged in for an interrogation. Though it’s pretty fucking clear he wants to treat me like a stranger, that’s not who I am. Whether he likes it or not.

He finally has the family he always wanted. I was only a placeholder.

Instead of sprinting across campus like I thought I would on arrival, I'm marching, punishing the pavement with every footstep like that will do anything to change the shitstorm my life has become. I have no control over anything—or at least that's how it feels. Being told what to do, where to go, how to behave.

I can't even make the decision to leave the house when I need to without having my ass chewed for it.

I bet she couldn't wait to call Dad for help. It didn't hit me until now. She could've called me, but she called him. The little bitch.

Sure, it's good that I don't have to see her during class today—it looks like psych is the only one we share—but she's never far from my thoughts. I can barely hear anything happening around me for the noise in my head, like somebody kicked a beehive. It fills my ears, and nothing I do will stop it. I try to breathe slower, remind myself there's nothing I can't handle.

Nothing's even happening right now—she's not in front of me, and I'm not interacting with her or anything like that.

It doesn't matter.

She's in my fucking head. Like a worm that burrowed its way inside my skull. A worm with giant glasses and a heavy sweater.

“ALL I'M SAYING IS, it's been way too long since we had a party.”

Easton jams an elbow into my ribs—I was only half paying attention, lost in the anger still simmering under the surface, just shy of boiling.

Rubbing my side, I have to snicker at him. “Be a little more obvious.”

“I wasn't trying to be sneaky. I'm saying, let's have a party.”

“You say that like you'd be the one throwing it,” I point out, making his brother laugh from the other side of the cafeteria table at lunch. “Seems to me I would be the one throwing the party, since I always throw the kind of parties you're talking about. So the right thing to do would be asking if we could please throw one at my house.”

Preston folds his hands under his chin and bats his eyes. “Please, Carter. Can we have a party at your house this weekend since your parents are going away?”

My parents.

All of a sudden, the sandwich and chips in front of me don't look as good as they did before.

"I don't know if that's good enough," I decide instead of reminding him to watch his language. The words he uses. They are not my parents. Dad, sure, but not Irene.

Saying some shit like that would only make me look childish and get my balls busted endlessly.

"But remember how great it was?" Preston sits back in his chair with a dreamy sort of look on his face. "Like Roman-orgy levels of great. So many pairs of tits bouncing in my face. So much pussy, just waiting to make my acquaintance."

I'm trying to be serious, but I can't help the laugh that bursts out of me. "It was pretty legendary."

"LET'S KEEP THE LEGEND ALIVE," Easton urges, wearing a smirk because he knows how this is going to end. "Let's take advantage of this opportunity. It's kind of our responsibility to give our friends a good time, isn't it?"

"Again, acting like you have anything to do with it. It's my ass if Dad finds out."

Instead of laughing, they exchange a look. "Do you think she would tell?"

She. Nobody has to use a name. Why the fuck can't she disappear? We can't even make plans without having to consider the unwelcome guest in my home. "It'll be fine. She'll lock herself in her room the whole time."

"You sure about that?" Easton asks. "Just because she doesn't want to be part of it doesn't mean she won't bitch about it later."

Of course, he's right. The fact that she doesn't want to be a part of it might be even more reason to complain and get my ass in trouble. I can see it now, the way she would put on her whole little terrified victim act, even though there's literally nothing for her to be afraid of.

Or is there? She wants to be afraid? I'll give her plenty of reasons to be afraid if she crosses me.

"Don't worry," I mutter. "I'll make it work. And if she knows what's good for her, she'll stay far away."

"Tiana!" Preston waves over the top of my head, looking past me. "Party this weekend at Carter's! Friday night. You know what that means."

Well, it's official now.

Tiana practically licks her lips when I turn to see her with a group of her friends, whose eyes light up before they giggle and nudge each other knowingly. "We'll be there," she confirms, giving me a long look before continuing through the cafeteria.

She's kind of a necessary evil, always hanging around, but she has hot friends, so she's not all bad.

And by the end of the day, everybody at school is going to know where to be on Friday night. The more I think about it, the better the idea sounds. I can use a release, that much is for sure.

Just one thing stands in my way.

No matter how confident I am in front of my friends, it's a different story by the time I'm behind the wheel with the freak next to me. I can add *snitch* to the list of names I've given her in my head—I'm still bitter over that fucking phone call from Dad.

And I waste no time telling her about it. "You know, you could have maybe called me to see why I left without you this morning. Or you could've called down the stairs to let me know you were running late."

I don't expect an answer. I know better already.

"Next time, if you're running late, tell me so. It's pretty fucking rude to leave somebody waiting for you and not say anything until you have no choice but to dime them out. Don't do it again."

The most I get is a soft snort. At least it's a reaction. I know she's alive over there—I'm sure as hell not looking at her if I can help it.

Might as well get to the point. There's still plenty of time before we get home, and I want to have this settled when we do. "Listen. There's gonna be a party at the house this weekend. Friday night, after the parents leave for their trip."

What a surprise—the fact that she sits there silent, like she's never heard of a party. Would I be surprised if that was true? "Don't worry. Nobody expects you to come."

Glancing her way, I notice how she stares straight ahead and holds her backpack a little closer to her chest, arms folded across it.

"In fact, if you know what's good for you, you'll stay in your room all night. Door locked," I add. "Nobody wants you there. You would only ruin the mood."

Is there a magic word I need to find to get through to her? What can I say to get a reaction? Because even though I don't want to hear her voice ever, it's damn unnerving to basically talk to myself.

"But here's the most important part. Here's where I need you to listen very carefully and do exactly as I say, or else I will make you regret it with every breath you take for the rest of your life."

She only shifts a little in her seat, like she's uncomfortable, but says nothing. Still.

"You will not say a word about this to my dad or your mom. Not a single word. You got it?"

When silence is all the answer I get, I snap, "I want to hear it. Do you understand?"

Still, the only thing I hear from her is breathing.

Until—

"And what would happen if I do tell them? What if I say no?"

So somebody decided to find their voice.

Of all the fucking times, she chooses now to push back? I'm so surprised, I don't know what to say at first. I mean, the answer is obvious, but I can't believe she would make me say it out loud. Or is this only a rhetorical question?

Maybe I should let her know how it feels to be ignored.

No, on second thought, she needs to hear this.

Once I've pulled into the driveway and parked next to Dad's BMW, I engage the child locks on the doors—they can only be controlled from my door panel once I engage them.

"Do you wanna know what will happen?" I ask, unbuckling my seatbelt, and turning my body in the seat so I'm facing her. "That's just fine. Let me tell you how it will be, and I'll speak slowly to make sure you understand. You won't say a word about this party to either of our parents unless you want me to make your loser life even more miserable in every possible way. I will make it my personal mission to make every day of your life worse than the one before it."

"Do you doubt I could do it?" I ask, watching her closely, studying her.

The only thing that moves is her jaw, clenched so tight it trembles a little.

"Do you?" I snap, making her jump. It's almost too satisfying, seeing her do that.

“No,” she whispers, staring at the house. “Can I go now?”

“Remember what I said.” Because really, it’s not like I’m dying to spend any more time with her. She’s out the door the second the locks are disengaged, almost running for the house.

If she knows what’s good for her, she’ll stay in her room all night. Let her think a little about what I said.

Let her imagine all the different ways I could make it a reality.

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SIX

Elliana

AT LEAST THE day is almost over.

That's pretty much the only thing I have to comfort myself with by the time I finish up in the bathroom after my last class on Thursday. The day is almost over, and I don't have to be around so many people anymore; hearing them laugh at me, all because I committed the unforgivable sin of being different. Because isn't that all that matters? Fitting in?

Forget trying to understand why I feel so broken and different. I mean, my own mother can't be bothered to try to understand. Why would perfect strangers put in the effort?

Still, is it too much to ask for them to just leave me the hell alone? I've never hurt any of them. I don't know their names. I don't care to meet them. I just want to exist. Why is that unacceptable?

I'm still asking myself that question as I open the stall door with my backpack over one shoulder. The row of sinks is straight ahead. I push up the sleeves of my gray sweater and wash my hands quickly, avoiding my reflection in the mirror that runs the length of the wall. The less I have to look at myself, the happier I am. Not that I'm ever very happy.

The door from the hallway swings open, and a bunch of high-pitched voices fill the room before any of the girls walk in. "So I told him if he wants me to swallow, he needs to stop eating asparagus."

The girls laugh louder than ever while I die a little bit inside, wishing I could've peed faster so I could be out of here before they came in. Instead of drying my hands, I wipe them on the front of my sweater before pushing my glasses further up the bridge of my nose. Nothing matters more than escaping.

Too late. "Oh. Look who it is. Carter's new sister," the ringleader announces. It's pretty obvious—nobody has to tell me. I barely glance at her reflection in the mirror, staring down at the basin instead. The weight of their stares is crushing, and the sound of their soft laughter makes my skin prickle and flush. Why? Why can't they just leave me alone?

"I guess living with Carter isn't enough to give you a clue about how to dress or act." The girls draw closer, surrounding me, pinning me in place with my thighs against the counter. One by one, they shove me, making me lurch in different directions. One of them yanks the backpack off my shoulder and drops it on the floor, while another kicks it, making it slide until it comes to a stop against the wall.

"I heard she didn't have any manners," one of them mutters before shoving me hard enough to make me bounce off one of her friends. "Maybe we should teach her some."

"Rude little freak with the huge glasses." That girl shoves me even harder, making me stumble sideways until all I can do is hold onto the counter to keep myself from falling.

"She dresses like it's winter every day."

"I didn't know the thrift store had such a huge selection." The girls' laughter bounces off the walls until I could go deaf from the sound. *Do not cry. Don't you dare.*

"Oh, for God's sake."

I look up at the mirror in time to see Wren stepping through the swinging door, with Maya behind her. "Are you seriously doing this, Tiana? Will you ever get a life?"

The ringleader tosses her thick ponytail over one shoulder, narrowing her eyes. "What a surprise," Tiana mutters. "Talk about needing to get a life. Do you just, like, slink around school looking for people to defend?"

"Occasionally, some of us like to dole out an ass-whipping every once in a while." Maya's smile is sickeningly sweet and completely insincere. She falls in place beside me, folding her arms and cocking her head to the side. "But then, you would know that, wouldn't you?"

On the one hand, it's almost comforting to know I'm not the only person this vicious, nasty creature has tormented. They say misery loves company, and I am definitely miserable.

On the other hand, I hate to think of such nice people going through what I do. I would never have guessed it, looking at them. I guess not everybody wears their trauma on their sleeve like me.

"Whatever," Tiana scoffs. When I find the courage to glance her way, she's scowling at me. "Loser."

"Just go away," Wren mutters, rolling her eyes.

"Gladly. Fucking stinks in here, doesn't it, girls?" Tiana wrinkles her nose before shoving her way past us, her friends trailing behind. They're not laughing anymore.

"I would tell you not to worry about her," Wren offers with a shake of her head, "but she's a real pain in the ass. And she never knows when to leave it alone."

"She's all talk." Maya picks up my backpack and offers it to me. With my head ducked, I accept it, slinging it over my shoulder. Now I'm even more embarrassed than ever, having them see me being bullied. Knowing I can't defend myself. It's beyond pathetic.

"Thank you," I whisper, cringing, wishing I could disappear, and this would all be over with.

"Hey. You have friends here, whether you know it or not." Wren's smile seems sincere, and I do appreciate it, but I hate that she has to defend me at the same time.

"We've both been through it," Maya explains before disappearing into a stall.

"Really?" I have to ask.

"Oh, girl. The stories we could both tell." Wren washes her hands before digging into her bag for lip balm, which she applies while leaning in close to the mirror.

"How about this?" The toilet flushes, and Maya reappears. "We were going to go into town, grab something to eat. Why don't you come with us?"

"After what just happened, you could at least use a milkshake or something," Wren agrees.

It's funny, but for the first time in as long as I can remember, I actually can see myself interacting like a normal person. Doing the sort of things

other people do without giving it a second thought.

They make it easy to believe they're sincere. I want them to be. I want it so much.

"Okay," I agree before I can talk myself out of it. When their smiles widen and their faces glow, I'm glad I said yes. My bruised heart needs a win today.

And since it means I won't have to ride home with Carter, I'm even gladder. I'm sure he'll be relieved, not having to ride with me today.

I can't remember the last time it felt like I had anything close to friends. I don't know yet whether they qualify, but they could. And that alone sparks something close to happiness in my heart.

"SO ANYWAY, she got the ass-beating that was coming to her." Maya dips the last of her fries into a chocolate milkshake, swirls it around, then pops it into her mouth.

"She was practically begging for it," Wren agrees. "You would think after all this time being embarrassed for being such a bitch, she would learn her lesson."

"Maybe she needs a visit from three ghosts on Christmas Eve," I suggest, and the girls' laughter makes me laugh.

"Now, that would give me hope," Maya decides.

"So, really." Wren pushes her plate aside and folds her arms on the table. "Besides Tiana, what do you think about your new school? And what about your new house?" she adds.

"The house is nice." Boy, that sure sounded sincere. "And school is fine. It's... big. There are a lot of people."

"Yeah, but you'll get used to it," Maya muses, playing with her straw. "And you'll get used to Carter, too."

Have I said anything that makes them think Carter is a problem? Wait, who am I kidding? They know him. They have to know he's a problem. "I guess," I murmur, taking a sip of my soda.

"What about the party tomorrow? You'll be there, right?" Wren asks.

"*Do you doubt I could do it?*" A shiver creeps down my spine when I remember Carter's parting words yesterday. His threats. "I'll be at the

house, probably, but I won't be at the party."

"How come?" Maya asks. Is she for real? After what she just witnessed back in the bathroom at school—not to mention everything else about me—she's genuinely surprised I wouldn't want to join the party?

"I get it," Wren interjects while I fumble around for something to say. I'm already exhausted from all this socializing, but I don't want to be rude. "A lot of people you don't know, plus things can get kind of crazy at Carter's parties. Maybe I'll hang out with you, if you wouldn't mind," she jokes.

"You'll find me in my room," I tell her. I genuinely wouldn't mind hanging out with her. That is beyond unusual, but then this whole interaction is unusual. Being defended by virtual strangers, girls who seem genuinely interested in hanging out with me. Girls who are kind and accepting and welcoming. Did I forget there are people like this in the world? Did I ever know in the first place?

"But really, I won't be much fun. I mean, I'm a little nervous just sitting here with you two," I admit with a nervous laugh. "Imagine me when there's a million people in the house."

"Maybe you'll feel differently tomorrow." Maya seems dead set on this.

"If Carter is the one who told you to stay in your room, maybe he needs to be reminded it's your house, too." Wren wears a knowing smirk when I look at her in surprise.

She's not wrong. It is my house now. And it would piss him off to no end if I made an appearance. That alone makes the idea of venturing out of my room tomorrow night a little too tempting. "I don't know. We'll see." I still highly doubt I'll go through with it, but I don't want to come off like I'm being impossible. They've been so nice. I don't want to ruin it.

I hate feeling like I have to weigh every word, but I don't have a lot of experience socializing. It's a chicken-and-egg situation—I would probably be more comfortable if I had more experience, but I'm too uncomfortable to stick my neck out and give it a try. I've been burned too many times, and too severely. Those memories are an invisible but very real and very solid wall separating me from everyone around me. They swirl in my mind as I follow the girls out of the diner, feeling like the odd one out. The pity friend.

Don't do that. How can I help it? I have years of evidence to fall back on. Evidence that takes a lot of the wind out of my sails by the time I'm in

the back seat of Wren's car.

She knows the way to Carter's without me needing to give directions. Good thing, because I'm completely tongue-tied after draining my social battery. I'm just not used to this. I have to wonder how they're so good at it. The way they make it sound, they were bullied pretty hard for a long time, but they came out on the other side, looking happy, sounding hopeful about the future.

Because things like that are possible for some people. I am not some people.

"Carter's home, I see." I look up at Maya's announcement. Yes, Carter's truck is parked at the top of the driveway. *Oh, shit!* I didn't tell him I would be out with the girls. I was so excited—and thrown off by that Tiana girl and her wretched friends—that I completely forgot to let him know I wouldn't need a ride with him. Well, he eventually made it home, right?

Something tells me he's not going to share the sentiment.

"We should do that again." Wren turns in her seat while I get unbuckled. "Really, it's nice getting to know you. Just remember, you have friends at school, and we have your back if you need us."

I could cry. I guess she understands how important it is to find a little support in a new world full of new people. The way she did, according to what she told me at the diner. She and Maya relied on each other a lot. What makes me so special that they would go out of their way to help me?

"Thank you." And I mean it, I really do, but that's as much as I can force out before I need to go or else start blubbering all over the place. I knew I was hard up for friendship and kindness, but this is pitiful.

Would it be too much to ask for Mom not to be lurking around when I enter the house? Silly me, thinking I might get a reprieve. "Look at you!" she almost shouts as soon as I have the door closed. Was she watching from the window? "See? It's not that difficult to make friends if you only get out of your own way."

"How do you know they're friends? I could have hitchhiked." Why did I say that? Why did I bother challenging her? Probably because I can't stand the know-it-all sound of her voice. I hate the way she tears me down whenever she gets the chance, then acts like she had anything to do with it when the littlest thing goes right.

"For once, would you try to act like a normal girl?" Her disdain might hurt if I hadn't given up on trying to earn her approval ages ago. Why

bother when I know I'll never earn it? Oh, that does break a girl's heart, hoping for something that will never happen. And my heart is already shattered into shards.

"You are impossible," she tells me, rolling her eyes before going to the kitchen while I head upstairs. Carter's bedroom door is closed—is something going my way, finally? Holding my breath, I start to tiptoe down the hall, pretty much clenching every part of my body as I silently pray to avoid him.

I forgot. My prayers don't get answered. And if they do, the answer is usually no.

His bedroom door is closed, but he's not in there. No, he is sitting at my desk, leaning back in my swivel chair while typing something on his phone. When I freeze in the doorway, my heart in my throat, he looks up from the device. "And there I was, thinking you were dead. Imagine my disappointment seeing you now."

Okay, all things considered, that's not a terrible reaction.

But of course, he's not finished. "I know I've asked you this before, but now I really want to know." He stands, kicking the chair away from him and making it crash against the desk. "What the fuck is actually wrong with you? Do you think I'm your personal chauffeur? Am I your Uber?"

"I forgot—"

"Oh, you forgot! Forgive me," he mutters, snorting. "Once again, I have to wait around for you. Only this time, I waited close to a fucking hour in the truck."

"An hour?"

"Because somebody didn't bother to do the decent thing and tell me she didn't need a fucking ride." I swear, he would spit fire if he could. That same dangerous, fiery light burns behind his eyes, practically searing my skin as he draws closer.

"You have my number," I remind him, knees shaking. "Why didn't you just call me?"

My simple, totally reasonable question stops him in his tracks. His brow wrinkles—can this seriously be the first time he thought of that?

It's pretty obvious he was too busy imagining what he would do to get back at me to actually do the smart thing and give me a call. It was one thing for me not to bother calling him once I knew he had already left for

school the other day, but this was different. He was just looking for a reason to be pissed at me, and it blinded him to common sense.

Am I going to say that out loud? Sure, why not tap dance on a field full of landmines while I'm at it?

“Let me guess,” he mutters, folding his arms. God, he is overwhelming—so much that I have to consciously hold myself together in front of him. He makes me feel so small, and I already felt small enough. “Since there’s only two people I can imagine who would actually talk to you, you went out someplace with Wren and Maya? Don’t flatter yourself into thinking that means you’re worth anything. They’re just nice girls. They would do the same thing for anybody.”

He’s right, of course. I already knew that. That doesn’t mean I needed to hear it. Something within me aches.

“Why don’t you think about that while you’re alone here in your room?” He pushes his way past me, but not before hip-checking my dresser hard enough to make everything on top of it either fall over or roll off onto the floor—including the one and only memento I have from my grandma, who was always more of a mother to me than Mom ever was. Her beautiful porcelain music box tumbles to the floor and smashes against the wood, destroying what’s left of my heart all at once. Tears fill my eyes before I can help it as I stare down in disbelief at the pretty, painted porcelain now in tiny pieces.

“Whoops.” That’s all Carter says before striding from the room, snorting softly on his way across the hall while I curse the day Mom met Paul.

Forget that. I curse the day I was born.

SEVEN

Carter

“ISN’T THIS NICE?” I swear, Dad is trying like hell to crack his teeth, and he’ll succeed if he doesn’t stop smiling so hard. “I could get used to this.”

An early dinner at a fast casual Mexican restaurant? Yes, we have definitely hit the peak of excitement around here. It takes a lot not to laugh in his face.

Really, the only thing keeping me from doing that is reminding myself he’s going away for the weekend after we get home, and I would rather not have anything getting in the way of that. I’m not trying to spread the word that the party is canceled or anything. There’s no way we’d be able to get the word out to everyone. Not the way Tiana talks. Half the world probably knows by now.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” Like Irene gives a shit. She’s ready to settle in on a beach somewhere—she’s even wearing a bikini under her sundress. The thin straps are visible every time she moves. “And if anything, it makes me look better. It’s already hard enough for people to believe I gave birth to one baby. If they see me with two kids, they’ll be even more surprised I was able to keep my body in shape.”

She’s had a little too much wine, already pregaming for her trip. For once, I have to adopt Elliana’s method of staring at my plate like it’s the most fascinating thing ever. It’s either that or burst out laughing, something I doubt Dad will appreciate. *Hold it together. They’ll be gone soon.*

Staring at my plate has other benefits. For starters, not having to see the look Dad gives Irene when he lets out a little growl of approval. Jesus, save me from this. Let somebody drive through the front window or something.

There's a second or two where I almost wish I could stand Elliana, practically wedged in the corner of the booth. This is one of those moments where we could have looked at each other and rolled our eyes, but instead, I would rather use the spoon on the table to scoop out my eyeballs. That's pretty much how I feel about her right now. Not that she's done anything to change my opinion.

After clearing his throat, Dad manages to pry his attention off his wife. "So, do you have any plans this weekend?"

The idea of Elliana having plans comes closer than ever to making me laugh. "Not really," I tell him, while until a few minutes ago I was making a list in my head of what everybody's supposed to bring. "I'm going to lie low."

"Really?" My wicked stepsister opens her mouth for the first time since before we arrived at the restaurant. "I thought I heard people talking about something big going on this weekend."

Fucking bitch. She chooses now to find her voice and fuck with me? She's got an actual, honest-to-God death wish. That's the only explanation. Otherwise, why would she go out of her way to get under my skin?

"Nothing that has anything to do with me." It takes everything I have to be casual as I reach for a tortilla chip and scoop guacamole out of the bowl in the center of the table. "I don't know who you were talking to."

"I would be happy to know my Elli was talking to anyone." Irene's brittle smile seems to make her daughter shrink inside yet another heinous sweater. This one is striped—maroon, gold, eggplant. Ugly, in other words. Everyone in this restaurant is dressed in polo shirts, T-shirts, skirts, light dresses. When is she going to get a clue?

"Your mom did tell me you were out with a couple of girls from school yesterday. It's so good to know you're making friends." Dad is really laying it on thick today, probably in a great mood because he has a weekend of fun ahead of him. Fun with his gold-digging bimbo wife whose brand-new Dior sunglasses sit perched on top of her freshly bleached hair. I had the misfortune of overhearing her talking about her plans for the morning before leaving for school today. Mani-pedi, bleach, a blowout, and waxing. I really did not need to know about the waxing part.

The less I know about this entire charade, the better.

Is she going to do it? Is she going to make the fatal mistake of telling them about the party? She should know better by now. I warned her.

But when I remember the wounded puppy noise she made yesterday when I broke that box on her dresser—the only remotely pretty thing in her entire room—I can't help thinking she's capable of anything. Whatever it takes to get back at me.

She wouldn't go this far. Would she? I hate not knowing. It's not like I was enjoying this meal before now, but even the chicken quesadilla that tasted so good a minute ago is bland and dry. I have to force myself to keep chewing it.

"I could go for another margarita." Irene winks at Dad suggestively before raising her empty glass to catch a server's attention. "As far as I'm concerned, I am on vacation."

A vacation from what? It's not like she fucking works unless planning a wedding intended to drain a hard-working man of his money could be considered work. The most cooking she does is to take something from the freezer and put it in the oven, and we still have the housekeeper who comes in a few times a week. She does literally nothing but lie out by the pool and bully her daughter. Oh, and make me hate her. But that's not something she really has to try at.

"Take it easy, honey." Dad's laughter is full of indulgence. "Have too much to drink now, and you'll be asleep before we cross the town limits."

While the two of them have their little conversation, I look over at Elliana, trying to gauge what's on her mind. She can try to get back at me all she wants, but not now. Not like this. There is too much riding on it, including my reputation around school and the absolute ass beating Dad would generously provide. He has never found out about one of my parties. How do I know? The man can't act to save his life. No way he could pretend to be clueless. Even if he could, he couldn't keep it up for long without laying down the law. That's how he's wired.

I look his way in time to see him nod in greeting toward somebody a few tables away. Everybody knows him. People respect him. Something tells me stories about drunken sex taking place all over his house and in his pool might tarnish his reputation a little. At least, that's what he would worry about. How is he supposed to tell other people how to live their lives if he can't keep things like that from happening in his home?

He's already pissed off at me over everything else lately.

Don't do it. If you want to live, don't do it. She thinks she has it bad now? Up to this point, I haven't openly encouraged the treatment she's getting at school, but that could change. All she has to do is push me far enough.

When I nudge her foot under the table, she doesn't respond. She doesn't even move. She's too busy picking at the burrito bowl she ordered. For one moment, I see myself taking her by the back of the head and shoving her face into the bowl. Maybe that would get her attention. But no, I keep my hands to myself, clenching them in my lap where no one else can see. This party had better go off tonight, or else I might explode if I don't have the chance to decompress.

It's barely four by the time we get home, and my nerves are shredded. So are Irene's, but for a different reason. "Let's go already!" she whines, and I notice the way she stumbles a little on her way into the house. She grabs Dad's arm to get her balance, but it makes it look like she's pawing at him the way she normally does.

"All right, all right." Somehow, he manages to sound indulgent of her antics. I don't see how. Their bags are packed and waiting inside the front door, and he wastes no time loading them into the car while she goes upstairs to make sure she didn't forget anything.

Leaving me alone with the freak. Do I remind her what I said in the car? It might only make things worse—she might have no intention of saying anything right now, but if I bring it up, the idea of tanking my party and my life could inspire her to make a serious mistake. The kind of mistake I would never let her live down.

So I settle for staring holes through her, watching as she sinks deeper and deeper into the shell that's always around her. The longer she spends not acknowledging me, the more I want to hurt her if it means getting a reaction. Something about her brings out every dark, hurtful impulse in me. I can't explain it. I only know I hate her a little more with every beat of my heart.

"All right!" Irene trills, meaning I have to pull out my phone and make myself look busy doing anything other than glaring hatefully at her daughter. She's oblivious, though. I could probably take the girl by the throat and pin her against the wall, and Irene would roll her eyes over being inconvenienced by having to walk around us.

She comes to an unsteady stop at the bottom of the stairs and throws her arms out to the sides. “See you Monday!” She even attempts to hug Elliana, who stiffens like the slightest touch burns.

“Have a nice time,” I offer, though my gaze stays trained on the sweater-wearing freak who only wraps her arms around herself after pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose yet again.

“The two of you behave yourselves.” Irene’s laughter is light, playful, but touched with more than a little bit of deeper meaning. “I remember how it was, wanting to cut loose as soon as the adults were out of the house.”

Somehow, I don’t find it hard to imagine that at all. Paranoia makes me fall in step behind her as she struts her way out to the car, where Dad is waiting. “Don’t hesitate to call if there’s any trouble,” he says as he helps Irene into the passenger seat.

“But don’t call unless you absolutely have to!” she calls out, laughing. Dad shakes his head at her in mock disapproval before jogging around to the driver’s side. *Go on, get out of here.* They can’t move fast enough as far as I’m concerned. And with me blocking the door, there’s no way for Elliana to come out. Would she text Dad? Call her mom? Maybe, but I doubt it. It would mean Irene giving her a raft of shit for cutting their trip short. I’m starting to really understand the woman, how she thinks. How selfish she can be.

Not that I feel any sympathy as I turn to find the freak standing where I left her, at the foot of the stairs. There I was, figuring she would run straight up and lock her bedroom door. I’m sort of glad she didn’t, since we need to get something straight, and I’m not in the mood to break her door down. “Thought you were pretty slick back at the restaurant, didn’t you?” I murmur, looking her up and down, watching her squirm. “Not slick enough. But I see you. And I have advice for you.”

At least she lifts her head enough to meet my gaze from behind those thick lenses that give her bug eyes. “Don’t fuck with me unless you plan on seeing it through,” I warn. “And accepting the consequences. Got me?”

When all she does is hunch her shoulders, I bark, “Answer me! Do you understand?” My voice echoes, filling the space, and it’s a satisfying sound. The way she flinches adds to the satisfaction.

“Yes,” she whispers. “Okay?”

“No, we are pretty far from okay, but it’s a start. Now, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll go up to your fucking room, you’ll lock the

door, and you'll stay in there all night. I don't wanna see you. I don't wanna hear from you. I don't wanna remember you exist. Understand?"

"Yeah, no problem there." Is that sarcasm I hear in her voice? She's lucky I have too much to do to bother with her anymore. I have a party to set up.

"Don't even think about showing your face," I warn as she climbs the stairs. I'm willing to overlook the way she slams her door, since it means she's on the other side of it.

If all goes well, I won't have to see her face until tomorrow at the earliest.

For now, time to shift into party mode. I need this. I deserve this.

"COME IN! First ones to show up." Stepping back, I sweep an arm in a grand gesture, welcoming my guests inside. "You know where everything is. Make yourselves comfortable."

Briggs and Tucker offer a fist bump as they come in, their other hands wrapped around the hands of their girlfriends. Kellan and the twins are behind them, and the almost hungry looks on the brothers' faces tell me how much they've been looking forward to tonight.

"Drinks in the kitchen?" Easton asks, already on his way in that direction, with Preston and Kellan behind him. All three of them have bags in both hands.

"The keg is out in my truck—give me a hand with it?" Briggs, Tucker, and I manage to get it unloaded, then roll it into the house on a hand truck. There are other cars coming up the driveway, blaring loud music that instantly picks up my mood. It's going to be a good night.

Or it could be, if it wasn't for the reminder of a certain someone I want more than anything to forget. "Is Elliana coming down?" Maya asks once I'm back inside. The tank top and short skirt she wears couldn't be more different from my stepsister's. They might as well be two different species. Why does she even care?

"She better not," I mutter on my way to the kitchen for a drink I desperately need.

“Why doesn’t she get to have fun?” Wren steps up close to me while I’m pouring vodka into a red plastic cup. This little routine she’s pulling might work with Briggs, but it’s not working with me. Getting in my face, playing the Good Samaritan.

“Because she’s allergic to fun.” And I’ve already talked enough about her tonight. A huge gulp of ice-cold vodka isn’t enough to dull my senses, so I take another gulp that almost empties the cup.

“Oh, come on,” Maya grumbles while the kitchen fills up with more guests. She raises her voice to ask, “Which room is hers?”

“Are you serious?” Adding more ice to my cup, I refill it, shaking my head. “It would be better if you left her alone. You know how shy she is.”

“You have already spent too much time thinking about anybody other than me,” Briggs tells Wren, winding his arms around her waist from behind and nuzzling her neck.

She only smirks and swats at his arms. “I’m just going to say hi. Maybe take her a drink.”

Maya’s eyes light up before she pulls a fresh cup from the stack on the counter so she can pour one.

For fuck’s sake. The more we argue about this, the longer I have to think about her, so I mutter, “Hang a left at the top of the stairs. It’s the room across from mine. The one with the door closed and locked.” *It had better be, anyway.*

“See?” Maya winks, before picking up two cups and winding her way through the crowd filling the room. She’s halfway through the kitchen with Wren close behind before calling out over her shoulder, “Was that so hard?”

“One thing I’m learning.” Tucker takes a drink from his freshly poured beer before shaking his head. “It’s just easier to give in right away. Because once one of them gets an idea in their heads, you can’t change their minds.”

I’m starting to figure that out. I’m also starting to figure out I’m going to need a lot more to drink tonight if there’s any hope of getting Elliana off my mind.

EIGHT

Elliana

SLOWLY, the noise downstairs gets louder. There's laughter, music, and life. In other words, it's easily the last place I would ever want to be.

That doesn't mean it's easy to ignore all the fun everyone else is having. I haven't flipped a page in my book since I picked it up. I've been sitting here, staring at it—physically in my room, but mentally downstairs—wondering how it's so easy for these people to have fun. What would it be like, going to a party and not worrying that somebody was planning to hurt or humiliate me?

I'm still remembering the humiliation of the last party I attended when a knock startles me. It's not possible to call out with my heart in my throat the way it is now. Why can't people leave me alone?

"It's us! Wren and Maya!"

I didn't expect them to actually come to my room. I'm too flattered to pretend I can't hear them, so I get up from my desk and unlock the door for them. "What are you doing up here?" I ask with a shy, disbelieving laugh.

They both look so pretty, showing more skin and wearing more makeup than I've seen on them so far. Wren tosses her shoulder length hair over her shoulder, and I catch the scent of her shampoo and perfume before she leans in for an impulsive hug. I'm so surprised, I don't know what to do, so I just stand stiff before patting her back. What is wrong with me? These girls are

going to give up on me pretty soon. It might be easier if they do. I won't have to wrestle with wishing I could be more like them.

"Here, have a drink." Maya holds out a cup filled with ice and a pink-colored concoction. "It's pink vodka and lemon-lime soda. You'll love it."

"I don't really drink." Though it does kind of smell good.

"Give it a shot. If you don't like it, you don't have to finish it." Wren stands in the center of the room, hands on her hips. "Closet?" I point to the closed door on the other side of the room, next to the bathroom door, and she scurries over to it.

"What are you doing?" I ask. My shoulders start to creep up around my ears, and my skin feels too hot and prickly all of a sudden. This is all wrong. It's too much. I don't know what to do.

"I like your room." Maya takes her purse off her shoulder and sets it on the dresser, then unzips it and starts pulling out makeup.

"Thanks. What are you doing?" I ask her—the second time I've had to ask that question in ten seconds. It's like I'm standing in the middle of a storm that won't stop swirling around me, no matter how much I wish it would.

"Getting you ready to go to the party." Eyeing my cup, Maya adds, "Maybe take a few sips of that. It'll loosen you up."

"We can't stand the idea of you being up here all alone. It's too depressing." Wren reappears with a few dresses over one arm. "You have so many cute things in there!"

Dresses Mom picked out for me—the kind of clothes she wishes I would wear. "I never feel right in things like that." I sink onto the bed, then raise the cup to my lips because why not? I might as well at least give it a try. The fruity soda is sweet and refreshing. There's only the slightest taste of alcohol on the back of my tongue before I swallow. This could be dangerous.

The whole situation could be dangerous.

"I bet we could pull this up into a bun." Maya touches a hand to my hair, letting it slide through her fingers. "It's so pretty, and it would be nice to see it pulled up, away from your face."

"I don't know. I'm... I'm not used to any of this." Another sip of my drink doesn't give me any of the liquid courage I've always heard about.

"Sometimes you just need to jump in and figure things out as you go along." Wren holds up two different dresses, both of which are the short,

tight kind Mom loves to wear. “Which one do you think?”

“She can try them both on,” Maya decides. “Then we’ll play around with makeup a little bit.”

“You girls don’t have to do any of this.” I feel my protests getting weaker, not that it matters since they haven’t listened to a word I’ve said. I can’t decide if they’re being too kind or maybe slightly pushy.

It’s the first time anybody’s bothered being pushy in a positive way in a long time. Mom’s just a bully about it. But their hearts are in the right place. That much I believe.

“Okay, I’ll try the dresses on.” The girls cheer, and my face flushes. I might actually enjoy myself a little bit tonight.

Except... “Carter is going to hate this.” My gaze bounces back and forth between the girls. “He ordered me not to come downstairs for any reason.”

“He’s all talk.” Wren sounds pretty sure of herself. “Besides, it’s your house too. Like we said yesterday. You have a right to go downstairs in your own house.”

“And if you happen to be wearing a killer dress while you do it, oh well.” Maya shrugs her shoulders.

She’s right. I belong here. And I can always come back upstairs if things are too much for me to handle. That thought gives me a little more courage as I take the dresses back to the closet, where I try them on in front of the full-length mirror inside.

If anything, Carter deserves this. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so mean to me. Maybe he’ll learn he can’t get away with saying and doing whatever he wants.

“Can I have my drink?” I call out while trying on a black dress that barely falls halfway down my thighs. I don’t know what Mom was thinking when she picked it out for me. It makes my already pale skin look ghostly white.

But it also shows off my waist, my boobs, and my butt. I’m not used to any of this being on display. Right away, I want to cover myself up. Why would anybody want to see me like this?

“That’s the one,” Maya decides once I zip it up. She joins me in the closet with the red cup in hand. “Here. Drink up. Let’s get you some more downstairs.”

“I don’t know. I feel naked.” I follow her out of the closet, where Wren whistles once she gets a look at me.

“You’re a lot less naked than some of the people downstairs will be before much longer.” The girls giggle... but the sound dies when all I can do is gape at them.

“Oh,” Maya whispers. “You don’t know?”

“Some people like to walk around without their clothes on at Carter’s parties,” Wren explains. “But it’s definitely not required. I plan on keeping my clothes on—though I might strip down to my underwear to get in the pool,” she confesses.

“No pressure at all,” Maya insists.

Naked people walking around the house. I’m supposed to feel comfortable around that? The next time I raise the cup to my lips, I drain the contents, savoring the warm feeling that spreads inside me. If anything, that means Carter will be even more shocked when he sees me walking around. I can pretend to be cool for one night. I can do this.

After twenty minutes, I’m wearing lip gloss, eyeshadow, eyeliner, and mascara. My hair is in a thick bun on top of my head, with a few loose tendrils framing my face.

“Do you really need these?” Maya asks, picking my glasses up off the dresser once my eye makeup is in place. “Do you have contacts, maybe?”

“Mom had me get them, but I’ve never really liked putting them in.” The look they exchange tells me I should at least give it a try. And really, after Maya put in all that effort with my makeup, I should at least make sure it’s on display. That means I have to force myself through touching my eyeballs—something that grosses me out more than I can say—but I have to admit it’s nice not having to push the glasses up my nose all the time.

“Wow.” Wren shakes her head slowly, grinning once I’ve put on a pair of black sandals. “I’m not trying to be offensive, but I would literally not recognize you if I hadn’t watched this whole transformation come together. You look gorgeous.”

I think she’s overdoing it, but I do feel prettier than I have in... ever. Like Cinderella before she leaves for the ball.

Only it’s not my wicked stepmother I’m worried about as I venture from my room. The noise immediately gets ten times worse as soon as the door is open, and I’m quaking inside, but the girls give me the courage—along with a drink, which has definitely started loosening my nerves. It must be, or else I never could’ve left the bedroom.

It's pretty dark down there, and I take the stairs slowly, absorbing the scene taking place below me. There are so many people, bodies moving to the beat of loud, driving music whose bass vibrates up through my legs with every step I take.

So far, everybody's got their clothes on. Maybe the fun doesn't really get started until it's time to get in the pool. That would at least make sense. I can't imagine people walking around naked for the sake of being naked.

Until a pair of girls pass us on our way to the kitchen, and neither of them is wearing a stitch. I don't know where to look. How does everybody take this so easily, like it doesn't even matter? I'm in a whole different world.

I definitely need another drink.

Good thing that's where we're headed, to the jam-packed kitchen where people are pouring from various bottles. "Hey, good to see you!" one of the guys calls out. When Wren puts an arm around his waist, I realize it must be her boyfriend, Briggs. The girls told me all about their guys while we were at the diner, but this is the first time we're meeting face-to-face. The adoration radiating from her when she looks up at him is both sweet and enough to make me burn with a sudden rush of insane envy.

I don't have much time to focus on that, as it turns out. "Are you fucking kidding me?" All at once, someone is almost on top of me, pressing me against the counter where I was pouring myself a drink from the pink vodka Maya shared. His breath is hot on the back of my neck.

Right away, I freeze solid while my pulse starts racing so fast it makes me dizzy. It's not hard for him to intimidate me—for anyone to intimidate me, really. But especially Carter, who growls like an animal in my ear. "What is wrong with you? Why are you so fucking determined to piss me off?"

"Why are you so determined to make everything about you?" Wow. *Where did that come from?* I mean, it's one thing to think it—and this isn't the first time. I've asked myself why he's so self-centered. Somewhere in his life, he got the idea the entire world revolves around him. And all the rest of us can do is fall in line.

"Doesn't she look great?" Maya appears beside me, like my own personal guard dog. As grateful as I am, there's a part of me that wishes she wouldn't do it. This is only going to cause more trouble once the party is over.

He doesn't say another word. The only thing that comes out of him is a growl before he walks away, which means I can release the breath I was holding.

"You do look great," Maya reminds me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. I've had more physical contact tonight than I have in the past few years combined, I think. I wish it didn't make me so uncomfortable.

"I don't know about you..." a guy I assume is Tucker creeps up behind her and grabs her around the waist, lifting her off her feet while she squeals. "But I could go for a swim."

Let's see if she can float!

The memories slam into me, making my head spin and my stomach churn. All that high-pitched laughter. All the screams and the cheers. *I'm drowning and they don't care. I'm going to die, and they don't care.*

"Come out with us," Wren urges, jerking her thumb toward the doors leading out to the patio. They're sitting open so people can move in and out of the kitchen, like a never-ending flood. Paul is going to be so pissed if he finds out about this. How in the hell does Carter hope to keep it a secret?

"Come on, it'll be fun," Wren insists, while Briggs pulls her toward the door and Tucker does the same with Maya. I can't move—my feet are rooted to the floor, my fingers curling around the cup so tight I'm probably going to smash it. *You're safe. You're okay.*

"Go ahead," I call out in a voice that doesn't even sound like mine. It sounds strained, tight, like the cries of a dying animal. "I'm going to hang out in here."

What I'm going to do is go back to my room, because this was a mistake in the first place. There's too much skin everywhere. I don't know where to look. I don't know how to act. Everybody's standing around having their conversations like it's totally normal for a guy to walk through the room with his dick bouncing around. My skin is on fire.

It's desperation that makes me look out through the back window—but all that gets me is a view of a topless girl pouring beer over her boobs so a guy can lick them clean while a handful of people laugh and cheer him on. This is normal?

I am not cut out for this. I know the girls meant well, but they don't get me if they think I'll be comfortable here. At least I can tell myself I tried as I duck my head and start fighting my way through the crowd. It's a solid

mass of people, and I don't think they mean to be in my way, but that doesn't make a difference. They are. They're making it impossible for me to get where I desperately need to be.

"What are you in such a hurry for?" A deep voice comes from in front of me, slightly slurred, but it's not unkind.

Right now, all I'm looking at is a bare chest, so I force myself to lift my gaze until I'm looking into a pair of dark eyes belonging to a very tall, tan guy with a quick smile and dimples that flash as he studies me. "Here I am, trying to get through this crowd so I can say hi, and you're trying to sneak past me."

I feel like such a fraud. He can't possibly mean it. If he does, he's wasting his time. If he knew who I was, if he knew the way people treat me, he wouldn't want to have anything to do with me.

Before I can pull in enough breath to say a word, he puts a hand on my hip and guides me—or shoves me—into a corner just inside the kitchen doorway. He's so tall, so broad, I can barely see anything around him. And nobody can see me.

"What's your name?" His forearms are propped to either side of me, and he leans down, wearing a look that leaves nothing to the imagination.

"I..." I can't breathe. He's too close. "Please..." My free hand presses against the firm muscle of his chest so I can give him a pointless little push he doesn't seem to feel. "Can you back up? Please."

"Oh, come on. Loosen up. Have more of that drink," he murmurs, chuckling as he lowers his head until his lips almost touch my earlobe. "Then we can have some fun. That's what we're here for, right?" Instead of swatting my hand away, he takes hold of my wrist. I don't realize what he's doing until his bulge is in my palm, held in place by his hand.

Let's see if she can float! She needs a bath!

Too much. All too much. My heart is going to explode out of my chest if it doesn't stop beating first. All I hear is the drumbeat of my pulse in my ears and the laughter trickling down from years ago. I was drowning, and nobody cared. They only laughed harder.

I'm drowning now. "Stop—stop—" The cup falls from my hand, icy drink splashing my feet, and the world is starting to go dark around the edges of my vision. I'm too dizzy to stand. My legs start to give out, and *I can't breathe!* "Stop!"

“Hey. Hey! The fuck is wrong with you?” Sudden shouting close by reaches my awareness before the stranger in front of me is pulled away. I barely realize it’s Carter who did it, Carter who’s shouting, before he punches the guy and makes him stumble against the refrigerator. “Leave her alone. Can’t you take a hint?” His fists are curled tight.

I don’t know if it’s fear or relief, but my legs are too weak to hold me up, and I start to slide down the wall.

“Hey. Take it easy.” Carter takes me under the arms and pulls me to my feet, supporting me while I gasp for breath. He studies my face, brows drawn together over blue eyes filled with concern. “What’s wrong? What did he do to you?”

“Nothing. I just... I can’t breathe...” I have to close my eyes and rest my head against the wall, fighting for every sip of air. “Can’t breathe.”

“Okay. You’re fine now. You’re safe, all right? All you have to do is take one breath. Try it. Just one breath. I’ll do it with you. In...”

Somehow, listening to him makes it a little easier. I’m only following orders, that’s all. I don’t have to think about anything. I just have to do as I’m told. Slowly, I’m able to take a breath, filling my lungs and clearing my head.

“Good job. Now out.” We exhale together, and I open my eyes and see the way his gaze moves over my face like he’s still worried.

Don’t get any ideas. He’s worried because he knows what will happen if Mom or Paul find out there was trouble tonight. It’s not because he cares. I’m a liability.

At least now I’m a liability who can breathe. “I’m okay now,” I whisper, trembling. “I’m fine.”

“You better go back upstairs.”

“That’s what I was trying to do,” I admit with a short, unhappy laugh. “I’ll go now.”

What a relief, being able to work my way through the crowd that seems to all be heading out to the backyard, anyway. It makes it easier to walk down the hall and round the bottom stair before climbing, holding onto the iron railing just in case I get a little dizzy again—especially since there are people walking up and down the stairs at the same time. I guess this isn’t a downstairs-only party. I wish somebody had told me.

“Oh, the line for the bathroom was too long.”

I know that voice, and the familiar sound makes me turn my head. Tiana is strutting down the stairs with her friends behind her in various states of undress, and all of them are laughing.

“So we used yours instead,” Tiana explains with a giggle, her teeth flashing and her eyes shining like a predator going in for the kill. But all she does is continue down the stairs while her friends giggle. I guess I don’t look all that different, after all, if they recognized me right away. That’s what floats around in the back of my head as I walk down the hall, ready to get in the shower, thanks to the soda and vodka all over my feet.

And maybe I would... if it wasn’t for the horror show my bathroom is.

There’s wet toilet paper everywhere, including a bunch that got shoved down the toilet until it overflowed. Somebody raided my dresser—bras, panties. It all sits in the water that’s spilled onto the floor and soaked into the bathmat. Somebody took my shaving gel from the shower and covered the mirror with it, then sprayed it all over the sink and the toilet seat.

Why? Why can’t they just leave me alone? What did I ever do to deserve this? Any of it?

This time, my legs can’t hold me up, and I sink to the floor outside the bathroom door before putting my head in my hands and weeping while the sounds of so much fun and laughter go on under me.

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NINE

Carter

“WHY ARE YOU HERE ALL ALONE?”

With my back against the pool’s concrete wall and my arms spread to either side, I turn my head toward the girl who just swam over. I’m in the deep end, meaning she has to tread water before reaching me, draping her arms over my shoulders. Her tongue darts over her lips before she looks down between us, where my dick is on display. My clothes are somewhere on the patio—I wasn’t really paying attention when I stripped down and dove in, wanting to cool myself off.

The girl bats her eyes and scrapes her lip with her teeth. “You look like you could use a friend.” Pulling herself closer to me, she rubs her tits against my chest. Not a bad feeling.

But not one that’s doing anything for me right now.

All around me, people are getting deeper into party mode. Easton is in the middle of making out with two girls, both of whom are playing with his dick while he gropes their tits and asses. Kellan has a blonde in his lap. I think I saw Preston walking into the house, holding hands with a naked brunette. Everybody’s having a good time.

Except for me.

And it’s all Elliana’s fault.

I should be hard as steel, especially once the girl who has wrapped herself around me starts planting kisses against my jaw. “How about I suck

that big cock for you?” she whispers in my ear while dragging her nails across the back of my neck. “Just scoot your ass up on the patio, and I’ll do it in front of everybody.”

Am I dead below the waist? Is that the problem? Because normally, I wouldn’t waste any time pushing myself up onto the edge of the pool and taking her by the back of the head so she could feast on me. Right now, though, the thought does nothing but turn me off.

And it’s all Elliana’s fault. I haven’t been able to get her out of my fucking head all night, especially since whatever the hell happened in the kitchen. She’s upstairs now, but she might as well be in front of me with that wounded look in her eyes.

I would never have guessed it’s possible to hate somebody the way I hate her. It’s a constant pulse running through my body, pure, white-hot energy that sears me inside. The water around me is cool, but it might as well be boiling.

I want to tell everybody to go home. I don’t want to see any of them. Fuck, I hate them all right now. I hate them for being able to let loose the way I wanted to tonight.

“I’m good,” I grunt, unwrapping the girl from around me and giving her a little shove. “But thanks.” She mutters something that tells me she’s insulted, but swims off, probably looking for the next swinging dick without a partner.

Pushing myself up out of the water, I stride across the patio and grab a towel from the stack on one of the chairs. All I do is a quick rubdown, including my feet—it took one experience with falling on my ass on the kitchen floor to make me more careful.

All through the house, people are dancing—dressed, naked, and everything in between. The music is deafening, pounding in my ears, making it tough to think as I work my way past groups of people. Girls reach out, grab at me, but I shake them off like they’re nothing more than pests. Because that’s what they are. And I am in no fucking mood.

She’s going to pay for this. Why couldn’t she do one simple fucking thing I asked her to do and stay upstairs? What do I have to do to get through to her? I take the stairs two at a time, my fury growing with every step. It doesn’t matter how much I drank. The alcohol only fuels the fire burning in me as I pound on Elliana’s bedroom door with the side of my fist.

“Open up!” I bark, pounding again before trying the knob. I shouldn’t be surprised when it turns. She’s not even smart enough to lock it. Can’t she do anything right?

As soon as I’m in the room, she shouts, “Get the fuck out of here!”

Whoa. It’s enough to make me stop dead in my tracks, looking around. Something is way off. The voice came from the bathroom, and I turn my head in that direction—the door is open, the light’s on, and she is crouched in front of the toilet, holding a sponge, cleaning something. Puke? It would serve her right if she made herself sick.

“Did you go deaf down there? I said get out!” She jumps to her feet and before I know it, I’m ducking a sponge as it flies through the air. It lands on the floor behind me, and I look at it before turning to look at her again.

I’ve never seen her like this, and it’s not the attitude alone that’s different. She’s only wearing a tight pair of shorts that could pass for underwear and a tank top that barely covers her navel. Her hair is still pulled up, though now more of it is hanging down around her flushed face.

“What the hell happened up here?” I ask once I catch sight of a pile of wet towels in one corner of the bathroom. Not just wet. Sodden.

“None of your fucking business! You are disgusting, and so are all of your so-called friends down there! A bunch of pigs!”

This is different. And I don’t know if it’s because I’m drunk or what, but for the first time since I set eyes on her, I like her a little bit. I like her better this way—with some fire in her voice and her eyes, instead of that constant look of fear she’s always wearing.

“Did somebody do this in here?” I’m probably taking my life in my hands by coming closer to the bathroom, and now I see a plunger sitting next to the toilet and a bunch of used paper towels sitting in a pile in the sink.

“Yeah, somebody did this! While I was downstairs. Pigs!” she barks again, gripping the counter with her head hanging low and her body heaving with every ragged breath. “What did I do to deserve this? Tell me! What did I ever do?”

The thing is, I don’t know. I know I have my reasons for hating this girl, but I doubt she has so much as looked at anybody in the eye at school so far. She’s too terrified to start shit with anyone.

“Who was it?”

“What do you care? For all I know, you put them up to it,” she mutters, lifting her head so her dark eyes meet mine in the mirror. Holy fuck, she’s burning with rage. “Tiana. She and her friends were walking downstairs when I was coming up.”

I should’ve known. That bitch never knows when to leave well enough alone. “I’ll deal with her.”

“Oh, please. Don’t do me any favors,” she fires back with a bitter laugh. “Why don’t you paint a target on my back while you’re at it, you selfish prick?”

Then she pushes her way past me to storm back into the bedroom.

Goddamnit. She should be like this all the time. It’s either the rage or whatever she was drinking, but she’s actually acting like a real person with emotions and thoughts.

I’ll be damned if it’s not making my dick stir in a way it hasn’t yet tonight.

“Get your ass out of here,” she concludes after grabbing the sponge she was using. “I have more cleaning to do, thanks to your nasty friends.”

But before she can sidestep me on her furious march, I grab her by the elbow and hold her in place. “Not so fast.”

“Get off me!” she snarls. “And the next time you come in my room, Carter, put some clothes on. Maybe you and your guests think it’s fine to walk around like that, but it’s not.”

I don’t even hear her anymore. Her lips are moving—full lips, ripe—but all I hear is blood rushing in my ears.

Self-control has never been my strong point, and she is testing it way beyond anything ever has. Nobody could blame me for not yet noticing her the way I am now. How could I when she’s always covered up in so many layers? Now I see the perky tits and the tiny waist that flares into a pair of hips I can imagine sinking my fingers into while I take her from behind.

How am I supposed to resist this?

“What are you doing?” she shrieks when I pull her over to the bed and shove her down. She can shriek all she wants. Nobody can hear her downstairs. And after everything she’s put me through, this is the least I deserve.

“Why don’t you relax and find out?” When I take hold of her ankles, she tries to kick, but she’s not strong enough to get rid of me. All she does is make me more determined to play with her. Has anyone ever touched this

body the way I am now? Running my hands up her calves, over her lean, silky thighs?

“Stop! You’ve made your point. Leave me alone,” she groans, slapping at my bare chest with both hands when I lean over her.

“I knew there was something you were hiding.” Her curves are lush, and every sweep of my fingers over her skin makes me want more. “Under all the clothes and the glasses, you’re an animal, aren’t you?”

“How about I claw your eyes out to show you?” she grits out, her teeth bared in a snarl.

“You could try. But aren’t there better things we could do?” When I cup one of her tits, there’s a second where the fury blazing in her eyes turns into something else. Something softer, but just as hot. Her nipple goes hard under my palm and makes my cock, which was already getting thicker, suddenly jump to attention.

I could take her here and now and there wouldn’t be anything she could do about it. I could sink deep, pound her pussy until I fuck the defiance out of her. And in the end, she would thank me for it. She would moan my name while soaking my balls with her juices. I can see her in my head, brains fucked out, splayed across the bed. It’s damn tempting.

Instead, I let my hand slide over her flat stomach while she lies under me, holding her breath, her body rigid. “It’s probably better that you hide this from me,” I whisper, inching lower, making her face contort as she tries like hell to resist what my touch is doing to her.

“Don’t,” she whispers, but her body is telling another story. Her hips tilt to meet my touch when I cup her mound through her tight shorts.

“So warm.” I sigh, my dick pressed against her thigh as I start to rub her in slow circles. Her eyes close and her head falls back, while her forehead scrunches like she’s concentrating hard on what’s happening. What I’m doing to her. What I would bet nobody has ever done to her before me.

It’s not enough to touch her with fabric between her hot pussy and my fingers. No, I need more, so I work my fingers under her waistband.

Her eyes fly open wide along with her mouth, but all that comes out is a broken moan when I make contact with her bare mound. “You’re not such a good girl, are you?” I whisper while I tease her bald lips. “What other secrets are you trying to hide?”

She only arches her back, nipples ready to poke through her shirt, and they are too tempting to resist. She arches again when I flick the tip of my

tongue over one of those taut peaks.

“Oh, my god,” she whispers, closing her eyes again, head rolling from side to side while I work her body like a puppet master. So wet—her juices already coat my fingers before I have the pleasure of sliding through her swollen folds.

“That’s right,” I grunt, while precum drips onto her thigh. “Give it to me. Show me how good you feel.” So fucking hot, so wet and ready for me.

And desperate. Her hips roll as one moan after another tumbles out of her mouth and fills the air. “What do you think? Do you think you could come on my fingers?” I ask, finding her tiny bud and rubbing it in quick strokes that makes her whimper.

“Carter...” she whines, and the sound unlocks something in me I didn’t know was there. Now it’s not enough to control her. I need to control her pleasure, decide when she gets it, how much. I’m not giving this up. Ever.

“I’m... Oh, god... I think I’m...” And then she bites down on her fist, straining, until the tension breaks and a fresh rush of warmth flows from her like a river. I want to taste her on my tongue. I want to feel her muscles ripple around me. More, I want more.

And when her eyes open and lock onto mine, the naked lust I see in them tells me I could have it. I could have all of her, here and now, while she’s flushed and breathless and still coming.

But no. Let her think about this for a while. A soft groan stirs in her throat when I pull my hand free and stand up straight, leaving her a breathless, gasping wreck. I commit her to memory: chest heaving, leg spread, a dark spot staining the crotch of her shorts before leaving the room and closing the door behind me.

Now that I’m rigid and straining, it would take nothing to find someone downstairs and fuck my frustrations away. But the idea doesn’t appeal for some reason. I can’t imagine doing it, can’t see it in my head. All I see is Elliana. Right now, nothing else will do.

Which is why I cross the hallway instead of going downstairs and lock myself in my room, my back against the door, my fist around my shaft while I hold my sticky fingers to my nose to inhale her musk. Fuck, the smell is unreal, intoxicating, and I can’t help but take a taste while fucking my fist hard and fast.

I can see it in my head. Her thighs around my ears while my tongue plunges deep, lapping up every drop. I can feel her hands on the back of my

head, nails scraping my scalp while I give her pleasure, like she's never imagined. Fulfilling every fantasy she didn't even know she had.

Claiming her. Controlling her. Fucking her with my tongue until she screams my name.

Yes, and then I would sink deep... gripped by her tight cunt... My head touches the door, and I pant for air, my fist flying, and my balls lifting.

When I come, the force is enough to make my knees buckle and my head spin. One spurt after another runs over my knuckles and drips onto the floor while I hold her image in my head. It would've been so easy to do whatever I wanted. To claim her body.

And I will. I'm completely sure of it by the time my eyes open and the world comes back into focus. I will have her. Now that I've given her a taste, she'll want more.

All I have to do is decide if I'll make her beg for it.

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TEN

Elliana

I SHOULD NEVER HAVE GONE DOWNSTAIRS Friday night.

After all of the insanity swirling around in my head yesterday and today, that's the one thing that keeps coming up. I should never have done it. What was I thinking? Is it so hard to say no to people when they want me to do something?

Then again, I said no to Carter, didn't I? At least at first. I said no, but he didn't listen, and he touched me until I came. I tried not to. I tried to fight him off. I did, but my body betrayed me. Like I had no choice at all.

Then again, what else is new? When was the last time I had a choice in anything?

This is ridiculous. I have basically lived like a ghost in my own house all weekend, only tiptoeing out of the room to grab food and bottled water from the kitchen when Carter went out at one point yesterday afternoon. Probably to return the keg, so there wouldn't be any evidence lying around once the parents get home. I hurried through the kitchen like a thief, grabbing protein bars, fruit, and cookies for later after making a sandwich. By the time I ran everything back up to my room, he was pulling in again. I just missed him.

But now it's Sunday night, and it's starting to get dark, and I really need to eat something a little more substantial than a protein bar and an apple. Hunger twists my insides and nothing I do can distract me from it. He's

probably laughing at me now, probably knowing how afraid I am to face him. How humiliating. I'm sure he thinks he won some great battle by sticking his hand down my shorts and making me come.

For the hundredth time this weekend, my body betrays me by sending a shiver running down my spine. The sensation ends at my pussy, with a fresh memory of what it was like to be touched that way. It's one thing to do that to myself, but for someone else to do it? It was electric, like flying.

Against my will. At least, at first. There was a point where I would've killed him if he stopped.

But then he left. He left like it was nothing. And that was right, that was good, even if it was crushing at the time. But once the rush passed, and I was actually thinking like a normal person again, I saw that he made the right move.

Not that I'm going to thank him or anything.

Finally, by the time it's fully dark on the other side of my bedroom windows, I can't wait any longer. It's not like I'll have a choice but to see him tomorrow, anyway, not if I want to get to school. I'll still have to suffer through the humiliation of a car ride. Might as well rip the Band-Aid off now; get it over with.

His bedroom door is closed, but there's no light coming from underneath it, so I don't know whether he's in there or not. Will there ever be a time when I don't feel like I have to tiptoe around, holding my breath? I dash downstairs silently as possible, then go straight to the kitchen.

It's kind of amazing how clean everything is. I guess he's used to throwing parties like that and cleaning up the evidence so he doesn't get caught. There's not so much as a single drip of spilled alcohol on the floor, and everything out in the yard looks exactly the way it was before Friday night. It's actually a little unsettling. If only it was always so easy to erase the evidence of something we don't want other people to know about.

My attention lands on the pool. I force myself to turn away before the memories can cripple me. I need to get something to eat before he decides to come down and torture me for the fun of it.

But no sooner have I put a pot of water on the stove than I hear his footsteps on the stairs. Dammit. I should've known I couldn't get away with something as simple as ramen.

My entire body tenses in anticipation as I stand at the stove, staring at the pot, willing the water to boil. "Oh, there you are." He's not even going

to try to hide his smugness from me, not that I would expect him to. That would mean doing the decent thing, and he can't be bothered.

"Did you think I died?" I mutter, still facing away from him. I hear him coming closer—what's worse, I feel it in the way the air changes around me. The way the hair lifts on the back of my neck.

"You could have."

"You couldn't have cared all that much if you didn't come to check."

He comes to a stop behind me, his breath warm on my neck when he leans in. I really should have grabbed something quick from the refrigerator. There is nothing worth having to put up with this.

"I would ask what you've been doing all alone in your room since Friday night, but then we both already know, don't we?" His hand lands on my hip, like a butterfly landing on a flower. As soon as I swat him away, he lets go, chuckling.

"You didn't mind when I touched you on Friday, did you?" Now he takes both hips in his hands and pulls me back against him, no matter how I try to fight.

"Stop, okay? You've made your point." It takes effort to shove his hands away, but I do it, going to the pantry to grab a packet of noodles. My hands are shaking so hard, I have to dig my nails into my palms and use the pain to center myself before reaching for the shelves.

"Oh, do you want to mess around in here instead?" His tall, wide frame fills the doorway, blocking my return to the stove.

"I don't want to mess around at all. I want to have something to eat, then go back up to my room. That's all I want." At least he's wearing clothes now, a T-shirt and a pair of soft shorts that hang down to his knees. Like he was going to work out, maybe. Wait, what do I care? So long as he's not running around naked like he did the other night, I'm grateful.

"I was thinking about having something to eat, too..." He lowers his gaze to my crotch and right away, my face goes hot. I really need to hide my reactions better if I'm going to get through this without making a total ass out of myself, but certain things are uncontrollable.

"You're disgusting." With my hands against his chest, I shove him away, but he only laughs.

"You liked being touched, didn't you? You can admit it," he murmurs with deep, knowing laughter in his voice. "I won't tell. It'll be our little secret."

I'm going to kill him. He really needs to not test me in a room full of knives. "It had better be, unless you want everybody to know you forced yourself on me."

"Forced myself on you?" He actually has the balls to laugh. "Is that how you remember it? Because when I think back, you were almost begging me for more. Spreading your legs wider, moving your hips all around."

The thing is, he's not wrong. I hate him even more for throwing it in my face. I *was* almost begging, because it felt so good—nothing's ever felt that good. And when was the last time I actually felt good about anything?

"Oh, come on." He stands nearby, his back against the counter, chuckling as he folds his arms. Thick arms. Arms I really need to stop looking at. Nothing good can come from admiring his body. "There's nothing wrong with having a little fun."

"You're my stepbrother."

His eyes narrow a little and seem to go a darker shade of blue. "Yeah, well, it is what it is. It's not like we've grown up together. There's nothing wrong with enjoying what your body can do." He reaches out, grabbing at one of my boobs, but I manage to turn away before he gets a good grip on me. "Loosen up. I could teach you a few things."

"I bet you could, but I'm not trying to learn." I need to get out of this room, now, before he gets into his head to try for a replay of Friday night. Forget the ramen. I turn off the water before adding the noodles to the pot and spin on my heel, ready to make an escape, but he's too quick.

"Oh, come on now." He laughs, backing me into the island across from the stove. My back touches the cool granite countertop that I try to slide along to get past him, but all he does is cage me in with an arm to either side of my trembling body.

"Just stop, okay? You've had your fun." I wish my voice sounded stronger.

"That's where you're wrong." He lowers his head until his lips skim my jaw. I turn my head away, but that doesn't stop him. He only caresses my neck with his lips, his warm breath heating my skin and making me shiver at the same time. "I'm just getting started."

My eyes close and a shudder runs through me and, for one crazy, unthinkable second, I find myself melting against him. Somehow, he's getting to me, and I hate him worse than I ever have, but not enough to make me fight against the touch of his lips on mine.

Oh, my god! All at once, an inferno comes to life in my core, lighting my body up, taking me right back to that night in my room, on my bed, when I was completely under his spell. Now I remember how it was so easy to give in when his kiss has the power to make me forget the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. All I know is this, right here and now, when my heart pounds and my nipples go tight and goosebumps pebble my arms under my sweater. I wish he would take it off me. My skin craves his touch in the worst way, and all it took was a single kiss to reduce me to this weak, trembling thing.

The worst part? I want more.

When he pulls back, I lean in, hungry, yearning. A soft snort from him makes my eyes open—he's smirking, the prick, enjoying the way he reduced me to a mindless, greedy animal.

“Hello! We’re home!”

“Shit,” Carter whispers, almost leaping backward to put space between us at the sound of Paul’s voice ringing out in the entry hall. I’m going to throw up—my heart is racing out of control, and I’m shaking so hard my teeth chatter. They’re not supposed to be home until tomorrow!

Running a hand over his short, blond hair, he murmurs, “We’re not finished with this.”

The flood of warmth and wetness from my pussy tells me my body agrees, whether I want it to or not.

“In the kitchen,” he calls out, sounding light and chipper, while sending me messages with his eyes. *Don’t even think about it. I will end you.* Right. I wouldn’t even know how to start to explain what just happened.

Paul appears, wearing a sheepish grin. “Hi, you two. We had to cut the trip short, unfortunately.”

“What happened?” My voice is tight, unnatural. I catch Carter’s sharp look out of the corner of my eye—like that’s going to help anything.

“I’m afraid your mom ate something at dinner last night that didn’t agree with her. She was so miserable, we decided to come home a day early so she could rest in her own bed. She’s headed straight up there.”

It’s probably wrong, but I’m glad I don’t have to see her tonight. “That’s a shame. But did you have a nice time otherwise?” Is this really happening? Am I standing here making small talk moments after my stepbrother shoved his tongue down my throat?

I can't believe Paul doesn't see it written all over my face. All he does is nod while wearing a pleasant grin. "It was very nice, thanks. I needed an excuse to relax for a little while."

Finally, he turns to Carter, who, until now, has been silent. "Thank you for this warm welcome home," he murmurs with a good-natured scowl.

"Welcome home," Carter tells him, smirking. "The house is still standing, as you can see."

Barely.

"Well, I'm gonna head upstairs now," I announce. At least that sudden interruption means I'm covered long enough to make it upstairs without Carter trying to stop me. I never did eat, but I'll survive. Maybe I'll wait until later, when everybody's in bed. All I know is it's for the best if I get out of the kitchen and hide away for a little while.

Maybe I can make sense of the mess going on in my brain and all throughout my body while I'm at it. I need to clear my head, which is why I immediately go to the bathroom to take a shower. It usually helps me get my thoughts in order if I can stand under the hot water for a little while and not think about anything but going through the motions of bathing. By the time the water coming down from the showerhead runs hot, I'm undressed, stepping into the stall, and turning with my back to the showerhead to wet my hair.

What am I going to do about him? It was bad enough when I had to hide because I was afraid of getting bullied the way I've been so many times before. At least that was the devil I knew.

With this? I am completely in over my head. I don't have the first clue about how to be sexual, how to manage my body's cravings. That's what I'm going to have to do. I need to manage this, plain and simple. I need to get a grip on myself somehow. To set the tone so he knows I'm not messing around when I tell him no. That I'm really not interested.

So what if that's a complete lie? Because as much as I hate him—and I do, so much, for so many reasons—the fact is I also like what he does to me with his hands and his mouth. I like it so much I consider touching myself, making my body feel good the way he did. That wouldn't do me any good. I would only want him more, and he is the last thing I need. This is all too twisted to comprehend.

By the time I'm finished, the walls of the shower stall are coated in steam that makes them almost opaque. I was in here for that long. I quickly

open the door, shivering when cool air hits my wet skin, and reach for the towel hanging from the hook.

Only it isn't there.

"What the hell?" I whisper, opening the door wider, looking at the floor, thinking it fell.

Which is when the sound of a camera taking a picture startles me, making me jump.

"That's right. Show me what you've got." Carter chuckles from the doorway as he takes another photo, then another, before I realize what's happening and pull the door shut with a sharp gasp. He snuck in here. He waited for me to finish showering and stole my towel so he could take my picture.

"You are disgusting!" I hiss while my skin burns with shame. "Get out of here! Before I scream for your dad."

"I don't think you'll do that." How does he sound so sure of himself? I can't see him clearly through the fog-covered glass, but can make out his shape as he wanders into the room, coming to a stop opposite the stall door.

"Why not?"

"Because I'll have sent these pictures to everybody in school before he makes it down the hall. He's busy taking care of your sick mom right now," he explains, snickering.

"You wouldn't do that."

"Are you so sure? You really want to test that theory? Because I promise you'll be disappointed."

He can't mean it.

Then again, why can't he? He's already proven how completely twisted he is. Crazy, because his dad seems like a normal person. Where did this walking, talking disease come from?

"How can you be this way?" I ask, now shivering in the stall while water runs down my skin and drips onto the tile.

"Don't waste my time with stupid questions. Come out here and convince me not to show everybody in school what your tits look like. I bet they'd love to see that shaved pussy, too."

The humiliation will never end, will it? It's going to go on for as long as the two of us live under the same roof. There's nothing I can do about it—that's the worst part, knowing I'm powerless in all of this. I can't do a thing to help myself.

“I want my towel first.” Am I seriously negotiating with this pervert? It sure seems that way. I don’t know what’s worse: feeling powerless against him or disappointed in myself for making it this easy for him to get what he wants.

He opens the stall door and thrusts the towel my way. I snatch it from his grasp before wrapping it tight around my chest. I wish I wasn’t shaking so hard, but I don’t know what he’s going to do. What am I supposed to expect?

He doesn’t keep me waiting long once I step out to face him. His eyes crawl over me and his nostrils flare before a long, shuddering breath eases its way from between his pursed lips. “If I had my way, this is how you would always be. All that wet hair begging to be wrapped around my fist.”

He has got serious problems. “What am I supposed to do?”

He snorts, then looks down at his crotch before looking back up at me. “I’ll give you three guesses.”

I don’t need three. “And if I say no?” I whisper, shaking no matter how hard I fight against it.

“Then my entire contact list gets a happy little surprise in their messages. It’s up to you, you know.”

I love how he makes it sound like I have a choice. We both know nothing could be further from the truth.

“On your knees,” he growls, sending a foreboding chill racing through me, even as I do as I’m told. I can’t believe this. Is this really happening?

Once my knees touch the cold tile, reality settles over me. Yes, this is happening, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

At least he doesn’t make me open his fly for him. At least he spares me that humiliation. It’s not like I haven’t seen his dick before—not that I wanted to, but at least there are no surprises when it comes to that. I know he’s big, and I know I’m going to have to put him in my mouth somehow.

Unless I want to give everybody at school even more reasons to humiliate me.

“Well?” he mutters once he’s free from his shorts, slowly moving his hand up and down his erect dick. “Get to work.”

I didn’t want to have to admit this, but... “I don’t know what to do.” No way can that come as a surprise.

And it obviously doesn’t. “I’ll show you. Here. Lick it.” He holds the mushroom-shaped tip out to me. “Like a lollipop. Give it a few licks.”

I'm going to die of humiliation as I extend my tongue to take an experimental lick. Salty. It takes everything I have not to wrinkle my nose in disgust before doing it again while he growls softly.

"Now, put your teeth behind your lips—that's important," he grunts sharply. "No teeth. Just your lips and your tongue."

Here goes nothing. *Please, don't let him hurt me.* Slowly, I let him into my mouth, past my lips, and right away, I know this isn't going to work. He's too big, there's too much of him. When I touch my hands to his thighs, he only takes me by the back of my head with a firm grip.

"Relax your throat. Don't be so tense." Oh, right, easy for him to say. When was the last time someone forced him to suck their dick? Still, it does get a little easier when I follow his advice and relax my mouth and throat. I can take more of him in me, but still only manage to get about two-thirds of the way down to the bottom before gagging.

"That's it. You're doing fine. Now suck it." His fingers press against my scalp, massaging it, sliding through my wet hair. "Up and down. Nice and slow."

Am I doing it right? God, I could die of humiliation as he groans softly, pressing on the back of my head. If anything, that actually makes it easier, letting him set the pace since I don't have the first clue. There's nothing I can do but hold on for dear life, my head bobbing up and down in a slow rhythm. I still can't help gagging when he hits the back of my throat, but it gets a little easier every time, and soon his groans turn to grunts. Needy grunts. I still don't have the first clue what I'm doing, but I think I'm doing it right if he's making those noises.

"Suck harder. More." He starts to move his hips, almost feeding himself to me, making me gag with every plunge into my mouth. Tears fill my eyes—I try to blink them back, but it's no use, they roll down my cheeks, anyway. This is really happening. At least it'll be over soon... I think. I hope.

"Oh, yeah. That's right. Suck my cock. Suck it so good..." He sighs, moving faster, sharper than before. Almost punishing me. All I can do is close my eyes and fight to breathe through my nose while he moves faster and faster.

Finally, he slams himself deep and all at once, a rush of salty warmth coats my tongue and my throat. "Take it," he growls, hand clamped around

the back of my head to hold me in place. “Swallow my cum. Swallow all of it.”

My god, I want to die. This is my life now. Going by his whims, no choice but to obey. Playing whatever game he comes up with his sick, twisted mind.

“Good job.” He finally lets me up for air, and I cough, fighting to catch my breath while my body sags more out of emotional exhaustion than anything physical.

He tucks himself back in his shorts before waving his phone in front of my face. “And whenever you get the idea to deny me, I want you to remember what’s on this phone. You’re a smart girl. I know you’ll make a smart decision.”

All I can do is stare down at the floor, miserable and deflated, while his soft whistling echoes through the room before he leaves it. One more tear drips off my chin onto my folded hands before I close my eyes and silently wish for all of this to come to an end. I don’t even care how at this point. I just want it to be over.

ELEVEN

Carter

“HAVE A GOOD DAY.” I shouldn’t get so much pleasure out of watching Elliana shudder at the sound of my voice. Maybe there’s something wrong with me, something fucked up in my head. Otherwise, why do I take so much enjoyment out of humiliating her?

I even enjoyed that clumsy blowjob she gave me last night. There was something about teaching her what to do, showing her how I want it. I’ll have her sucking me off like a champ before long. She might even learn to like it.

Not that I care if she does. She could choke on my cock for all I care. We need to remember where this started and why. I might want more of what I got on Friday, but that’s where it ends. She is still a miserable little freak whose presence makes me sick.

That doesn’t mean I can’t have a little fun with her. I deserve a little fun, I think. Nothing wrong with that.

She scurries off, head down, back to her frumpy grandma clothes. She actually didn’t look too bad in those contacts the other night, but I doubt she’ll wear them again. She would rather look hideous, like she’s trying to prove a point. I can’t imagine what.

“Hope you didn’t have any plumbing problems!” There’s laughter up ahead, and I watch as Elliana retreats faster than before, holding her backpack in front of her like a shield.

She's running away from Tiana, lounging on a bench with her girls, sitting there like a queen on her throne. She's got the least self-awareness of anybody I've ever met—completely unaware of how pointless she is.

"Hey, you." I don't bother hiding my anger as I crook a finger, beckoning her. "We need to have a talk."

Her eyes light up before she hops off the bench. "Hey, Carter. Great party. It's been too long since you threw one."

"It's the last one you will ever attend," I mutter once it's just the two of us standing behind a tree near the bench where her friends wait. Friends. More like girls who are too afraid to do anything but kiss her ass because they know how wretched she is.

"Why? What do you mean?" She even has the balls to bat her eyelashes and act like this is a total surprise. She never knows when to stop.

"You know what I mean," I murmur, leaning down until we are eye to eye. "That was a shit move you pulled. That's my house, too, you know? If my parents found that mess you left, I would've had to explain where it came from. Do you think I feel like doing that?"

"Oh," she breathes, blinking fast. "I didn't think about it like that. Yeah, I'm sorry, really."

"I don't wanna hear your apologies," I whisper, making her gasp like she's surprised. "Don't even think about setting foot in my house again. You've lost your privileges."

"Wait a minute," she snaps. "You don't get to say that to me. You don't talk to me that way."

"And you don't flood a bathroom in my fucking house and then expect me to praise you for it," I snap back. "And I'm not arguing about this anymore. You fucked up. From now on, you're going to leave Elliana alone. If anybody's gonna fuck with her, it's me. You don't have the right. Understood?"

For some reason, she still looks confused, even wounded. "But..."

"Understood?" I repeat, teeth gritted.

"Fine," she mutters, rolling her eyes. "I swear to God, it's pathetic. She's a loser."

"That has nothing to do with it. Lay off," I warn one last time before walking away. The sight of her sickens me. She has no reason to do what she's doing. I do.

I hear her behind me as I walk away, muttering to the girls over what just happened. I'm sure her version of the story is much different than the truth, but I can't bring myself to care—so long as she gets the message.

Meanwhile, all I can do throughout the day is remember the photos on my phone. I spent plenty of time studying them last night when I was alone again, and it wasn't long before I had no choice but to take care of a new erection. My balls were drained by the time I fell asleep with a smile on my face, the possibilities of what I unlocked dancing through my head. There is no end to what I can do to her now—how much fun I can have.

If she only loosens up, she could have fun too. Because I'm not about to forget how she came, just like I can't forget the smell of her pussy on my hand. What a shame I had to wash it away.

Today, there's more than just school to think about. Rather than going home after class, I drive us into town, where a bridal shop sits next door to a tailor. "Your mom is here already," I mutter, noting Irene's presence in the front window of the bridal shop, trying on veils.

Elliana only groans softly before opening the car door. I hear the way she sighs as she steps out—it's obvious she's not looking forward to this. That makes two of us, because I'm not looking forward to going next door, where Dad is waiting for our tuxes to be fitted.

This is actually happening. We are actually getting ready for this damn ceremony and reception.

"It would really mean the world to me if you would go along with all of this." Dad stands in front of a three-way mirror while the tailor takes measurements, and I hang back, less than thrilled. "Are you listening?" he asks.

"Of course. I'm listening."

"Right, but you're not hearing me," he insists. It takes everything I have not to roll my eyes. It's never enough, is it? He always demands more than I'm ready or willing to give him.

"I don't know what you want," I have to admit. "I'm not going to do cartwheels, Dad."

"I'm not asking you to. But I would like a little bit of camaraderie here." When I arch an eyebrow at his reflection, he scowls. "You know what I'm saying. You drag your feet. You act like a spoiled baby. You're casting a shadow over all of this, and it's making me very unhappy. I'm not asking you to be her best friend. I'm asking you to take me into account, the

way I have taken you into account your entire life. She makes me happy. Why isn't that enough?"

Well, shit. When he puts it that way, I feel around two inches tall.

"I've waited a long time for this, and you know that," Dad continues. "I have never met a woman I wanted to date, much less marry, since your mom left. Finally, I'm ready to take this step. I don't need you hanging around, all doom and gloom, making things uncomfortable. Are you hearing me? Am I coming through?"

Yes, and as usual, he has to beat a dead horse. "I get it," I mutter, finally softening when he lowers his brow. "I do get it," I insist, softer now. "And yeah, of course I want you to be happy. So long as you know this is right. That she is right."

His face softens, and it makes me a little sick. "I do know. And that's all I need."

"Okay, then." Because that's as much as I can muster without gagging. Still, he has a point. He has never brought women around—ever—to the point where I was a little worried about him for a while, wondering if he'd completely shut down. He's still a young man. I didn't want to see him bury himself.

But if I knew the alternative was Irene? I would've been the first one to help fill in the grave once he jumped in.

Somehow, I manage to keep my thoughts to myself. If I'm making him unhappy, I'm sorry for it. It's not like he's a bad father—not even close. When Mom left, he had to take on the job of mother and father along with his job, which also demanded a lot of his time. But somehow, he made it work. I never felt like I came in second.

Not until now. But I'm grown up now, too. I don't need so much of his attention. I guess it's a good thing for him to start putting his life together... even if he is putting it together with that gold-digging whore.

A gold-digging whore we're supposed to be meeting for dinner after we finish at the tailor's. Irene and Elliana are already waiting for us across the street by the time we're finished, with Irene waving wildly at us as we cross like we couldn't see her. She looks like she's bubbling over with excitement. Wonderful. Can't wait to put up with her through the meal.

Meanwhile, Elliana sits across from her, with the sleeves of her sweater pulled down over her hands and her hair hanging along the sides of her face. I try to catch her eyes as I sit on her right at the square table, but she's

back to her old tricks, deliberately avoiding me, picking at a dinner roll instead.

Dad is blissfully oblivious, leaning down to kiss Irene before taking his seat in the last remaining chair. “So? How did it go, girls?”

“I think you’re going to be one very happy man.” The woman is beaming, practically glowing with excitement. “Isn’t he, Elli?”

Elliana’s head snaps up just long enough for her to nod, then she looks back down at her plate.

Dad wants to be a family man? He’s waited so long for this? I catch his eye, then incline my head toward my stepsister and raise an eyebrow. Finally, he notices her and frowns. “How about you, Elliana? Everything go all right with your dress?”

“Oh, of course she’s grumpy about it.” Irene rolls her eyes dramatically and waves a dismissive hand. “God forbid, she can’t wear one of her lumpy sweaters and cover every square inch of her skin. All I ask for is one day.” She holds up a single finger, narrowing her eyes her daughter’s way.

All Elliana does is stiffen her spine a little. She doesn’t say a word. Barely reacts. Doesn’t look up from her plate. For once, I’m almost proud of her for it. She refuses to let Irene see what her criticism does.

“Of course,” Irene continues, oblivious, “it does seem a little extravagant, spending all that money for one day.”

With a giggle, she wiggles her eyebrows at Dad. “Not that I’ve let that stop me.”

And there goes what was left of my patience, spiraling down the drain. This fucking bitch. How can she sit there and basically brag about spending so much of his money?

“I couldn’t help it. I had to go with the hand-beaded veil. You’ll love it when you see it,” she gushes, closing a hand over Dad’s, resting on the table. “Every time I move my head, it sparkles. It’s to die for, I swear—you won’t believe your eyes.”

Yes, because there’s nothing more miraculous than a veil with beads on it. How revolutionary. I can hear my teeth grind.

“Oh, I already ordered appetizers for the table,” she continues when a pair of servers walk our way. “Nothing too heavy. We girls have to be careful now that we’ve had our final fittings. And so do you boys,” she warns, shaking a playful finger my way.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I mutter with as much enthusiasm as I can manage, all things considered. Dad has no idea how much he’s asking of me, forcing me to sit through this. How can he be so blinded by her? How can he not see through her? She’s not even original or clever about how she drains him of his money. She’s not smart or sophisticated enough to be clever about it—or at least discreet.

“Have you gotten everything together for our honeymoon?” Dad asks, clearly hanging on her every word. He swears he’s happy. He says this is what he wants. I can’t fucking fathom it.

She squeals before popping a fried calamari ring in her mouth. “Yes! My new clothes came in today, in fact.”

“New clothes?” I ask, glancing toward Dad. He is blissfully unaware.

“Well, you can’t go to Thailand looking like a slob,” Irene insists—like she would know. Like she’s ever been anywhere before now. “And I want to look nice on my honeymoon. I’m sure we’ll be taking plenty of pictures, after all. I want to look back fondly.”

Sure, and everybody knows you can’t look back fondly on an event unless you’re wearing an entirely new wardrobe. A glance at Elliana gives me no clue what she’s thinking, though something tells me we’re on the same page. She’s cringing, playing with a stuffed mushroom on her plate as an excuse not to look up.

“The shoes!” Irene gushes, guiding a calamari ring toward Dad’s waiting mouth. “I’m almost embarrassed by how much I spent, but you’re going to love them. We’ll be doing a lot of walking, after all—I want to be comfortable while looking good for you.”

I’m going to be sick. The smell of the food turns my stomach until I can’t stand being at this table another second. When I push away from it, Dad and Irene look my way with wide eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asks in response to what has to be disgust etched across my face.

He really needs to ask? “I’ve had enough.” Folding my napkin, I leave it on the chair before pushing it closer to the table.

“But you haven’t eaten,” Irene so helpfully points out. Nothing gets past her.

“I don’t have an appetite. I think I’ll just drive home—can Elliana ride with you?” I ask. Because something tells me she would love nothing more than the excuse to escape, too. But I’m not going to give it to her. Let her sit

here and suffer through this. Maybe next time we're all out together, she'll be a little more friendly. Maybe we can commiserate.

Right now, all that matters is getting out of this restaurant and as far from the whole charade as possible. The wedding is looming up, right on our asses, and I'm going to have to find some way to make it through the day without either laughing openly or getting shitfaced just to survive.

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TWELVE

Elliana

“I’M SURE HE’S FINE,” Mom tries to keep her voice low on the way home, putting a hand on Paul’s leg in the front seat. “Everything is fine. He probably just wasn’t feeling very well.”

Something in the way Paul grunts tells me he doesn’t buy it—and he’s right, obviously. For some reason, Mom refuses to acknowledge the way Carter feels about her, about this entire arrangement. But that’s not really a surprise. I’ve known her all my life, and I know how good she is at ignoring the things she doesn’t want to acknowledge.

Like me, for instance, who she has successfully ignored for most of my life. I exist, sure, but I’m almost like a chore she can’t avoid. Like washing dishes or mopping the floor. A necessary evil. That’s all I am.

And what is she to me? Right now, a source of massive embarrassment. She’s not only an expert at closing her eyes to the truth, she’s also massively unaware of how obnoxious she can be. To sit there and practically brag about all the money she’s spending? I wanted to die of shame. But she doesn’t see anything wrong with it. She thinks it’s totally normal to talk to her husband like he’s nothing more than a walking credit card. I honestly don’t know how she does it. I don’t think I would be able to live with myself.

“I hope you were still able to enjoy your dinner.” It takes me a second to realize Paul is talking to me. When I look at the rearview mirror, I find him

offering a slight grin. “That was some pretty good chicken parm, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” I agree, making the effort to speak because I feel sorry for him. He’s in a bad position. For some reason, he loves Mom—I can’t figure that one out. But Carter’s not making it easy for him. At least I know I’m not the only one he tends to make miserable. Right now, watching frustration play out over Paul’s face in the mirror, I don’t find any comfort.

“Now remember,” Mom teases—at least, she tries to make it sound like she’s teasing as we roll up the driveway. “We need to be careful what we eat for the next couple of weeks until the wedding rolls around. We can’t afford to gain a pound.”

“I won’t forget,” I murmur, gazing out the window toward the second floor of the house. Carter’s room overlooks the side of the house where Paul pulls in. Does he know we’re here? The lights are out up there. He hasn’t gone to sleep yet, has he? I can’t imagine why he would. It’s not even nine o’clock.

Maybe he really does feel sick. I can’t believe I care either way as we walk around to the front of the house with Paul teasing Mom over something or other—I’ve completely tuned them out, all of my thoughts focused on what’s waiting for me once I’m inside.

Please, don’t let him be in a bad mood. If he’s in a bad mood, there’s not a doubt in my mind who he’s going to take it out on. I would like just one peaceful night. Is that too much to ask? It’s bad enough I had to sit there and listen to Mom make an endless fool of herself throughout dinner while wishing the whole time that I could crawl under the table and not come back out.

I hate the thought of anybody knowing she’s my mother. Every loud, bawdy laugh, every time she squealed over something, I shrank a little further in my seat. Does she get off on being so embarrassing? No, because she thinks she’s being charming. Completely deluded.

All I know is, I can’t afford for Carter to be in a bad mood. Those photos on his phone are never far from my mind. What if he decides he’s so pissed at Mom, he’ll use them to get back at her somehow? Not that I would ever tell her. Even if I believed she would be remotely sympathetic. I would rather have my tongue run over by a truck than breathe a word of it to her. What could she do about it, anyway?

No, I get the feeling it would be enough for him to know he defiled her daughter. That would satisfy him, at least for a little while. At least until he

got bored with it and decided to up the ante again.

“Less than three weeks.” Mom can’t stop gushing about the wedding as we walk into the house, where she winds her arms around Paul’s neck as soon as the door is closed. “And the whole town will be with us to celebrate. I hope I do you proud.”

“Of course you will. There’s not a doubt in my mind.” And the thing is, it sounds like he means it. He is really not a bad guy at all. I hope she’s careful with him, for his sake. All I know about his past is that his first wife left a long time ago. Mom never gave me any reason—maybe Paul didn’t tell her. Maybe Carter’s mom never gave him a reason in the first place.

If I gave birth to the antichrist, I would want to get far away from him, too.

I’m not sure how much of this lovey-dovey stuff I can handle, so I quietly excuse myself after thanking Paul for dinner, then slowly make my way up the stairs. Every step I climb makes my heart a little heavier. Where is he? And what kind of mood is he in? *Please, don’t let him take it out on me.* At this rate, I’m pretty sure that’s a pointless prayer. I’m pretty sure he looks for reasons to be mad at me.

His bedroom door is closed, the light is still out. There’s no sound coming from under the door.

And there’s a simple reason for that, one which I discover as soon as I’ve opened my bedroom door.

“Took you long enough to get home,” he murmurs, sitting on my bed with his back against the headboard, shoes off, legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. Like he belongs here.

Which he definitely does not. “Please, I’m not in the mood for this,” I whisper, remembering where I left our parents. “And they are right downstairs, so you might want to be quiet.”

“Thanks for the advice, but I think I can handle myself.” We have very different opinions on that. I’m smart enough to hold my tongue.

Once I’ve closed the door and flipped on a light besides the one on the nightstand, I take off my trainers. “Why did you leave when you did?”

“You honestly have to ask that question? Come on,” he groans, shaking his head while wearing a knowing smirk. “You know why. Don’t make me say it out loud.”

“No, please. Now I’m interested.”

“Because your mother is an embarrassment.” He flashes a grin. “There. Happy?”

“If you think that’s going to hurt my feelings, you’ve wasted your breath.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think that’ll hurt your feelings at all. I see the way you react to her. Somebody needs to set her straight.” I have to force myself to look at him, and when I do, it’s in time to watch his jaw go tight.

“Don’t go thinking it has to be you,” I warn. “Yes, she’s embarrassing, but she’s my mom and she’s your dad’s wife,” I add. There’s something too satisfying about the way he shudders. What a baby.

“I know you’re not giving me advice right now. I know that’s not what’s happening.” He swings his legs over the side of the bed, and I can tell I’m in trouble. When am I going to learn to just keep my mouth shut in front of him? I can think anything I want, but I can’t say it out loud. Wasn’t I just thinking about keeping him in a good mood, or at least not pushing him into a bad one? Yet there I go, running my mouth—and for what? To defend Mom?

“Now that you mention it,” he continues, looking me up and down. “I did miss dinner, and I am hungry.”

“You should’ve made something when you got home. You had plenty of time.” Something inside tells me he’s not really thinking about food. Not when there’s a wicked light in his eyes.

“I would rather eat you, Elliana.” He drags out each syllable, letting them roll over his tongue. “What do you think about that?”

What do I think? I think I should run screaming from the room. I think he needs to have his head examined.

I think he’s going to do it whether I want him to or not.

“Why do you have to do this?” I ask anyway, because I have to at least try to get through to him.

“Because I want to,” he replies, lifting a shoulder. Like it’s the most obvious thing ever. “And because you don’t have a choice unless you want the whole school to see your bare tits. Among other things.” He chuckles at the way my face goes hot with humiliation.

“Listen,” he grunts, his chuckles dying all at once. “You might be the only living, breathing woman to get offended at somebody wanting to eat them out. I like the way you smell. I like the way you tasted on my fingers.”

Despite my horror, his simple statement sets fire to my pussy. I go blazing hot down there, hotter than the flush covering my face, hotter than anything has ever made me feel.

“Now get on the bed,” he concludes, staring me down while my skin crawls and my pulse picks up speed. “And take off your jeans. Let’s see how quiet you can be once I get to work. There’s no party to drown you out this time.”

When I don’t move fast enough, he’s off the bed, taking me by the arm and dragging me over before shoving me backward hard enough to make me bounce. “Quit wasting time,” he grunts, unbuttoning my jeans.

How is it always like this? How does he manage to get the upper hand every time? I don’t have a prayer of winning. I shouldn’t bother trying.

If I let him do what he wants, he’ll go away. I lift my hips so he can pull my jeans down until they fall past my feet onto the floor. “There it is,” he whispers, sounding almost reverential as he lowers himself to his knees in front of me. “There’s that pussy. Take off your panties,” he demands, already breathing harder than before. Is this all it takes? I can’t understand it.

My hands shake, but I manage to tug the waistband down over my hips and my butt before slowly pulling them down. I could die of shame, I really could, knowing I’m on full display for him. Of all people.

The worst part? I don’t have a choice. He’ll go through with his threats. I know he will. I have to do this, no matter how it makes me want to die.

“Oh, fuck.” When I dare look down at him, what I find shocks me. He’s staring at me, his mouth hanging open a little so every short breath can make warm air fan across my bare skin. “So pretty. So pink and already so wet. Have you ever felt a tongue on your pussy?”

He must already know the answer, but I shake my head, anyway. There’s a look of triumph in his eyes, satisfaction. That was the answer he wanted.

“Don’t make a sound,” he warns, spreading my thighs wider, placing my feet on his shoulders. Oh, my god, is this really happening? I don’t know what to think, how to feel. I hate him, yes, but there’s also a fire burning low in my belly, something hotter than anything I’ve ever felt or knew possible. Before he’s ever touched me, my fists twist the duvet under me, while the sensation of cool air against my hot flesh leaves me shivering in anticipation of what’s to come.

And now it's his breath I feel against my lips. The sensation is unreal—my teeth sink into my tongue as I lift my hips to silently beg for more. Like my body has a mind of its own. I don't even have to think about it, and it happens.

"Greedy," he whispers, laughing softly before the most heavenly sensation starts at my slit and makes my toes curl. His tongue, moving slowly up and down through my wetness.

I had no idea! How could I? It's one thing to guess something will feel good, but to actually feel it? "Fuck, so sweet," he growls before pressing his face tight against my flesh and wiggling his tongue around.

Fireworks explode behind my eyelids, and I have to bite on my fist to hold back the cries that are stirring in my chest. I don't think I can take it. It's too much. He's tormenting me, barely touching his tongue to my most sensitive parts, laughing against my swollen folds while I writhe and moan as softly as I can.

I can't help it. I know I shouldn't like it, but it's the most incredible thing I've ever felt. All I want is to take him by the back of the head and pull him in close, to grind against his face. It's the most insane impulse—I have no idea where it comes from. I only know I will die if he stops.

His greedy, animal grunts fill my ears and send vibrations running through my pussy. His tongue is magic, working my clit before circling my entrance. My nerves are singing, my body on fire, but it's the way he grunts so happily through all of it that drives me wild. He likes it. He likes this. And that only makes it better somehow.

"My god," I whimper, my hips rolling in circles, the pressure building, growing, filling me like air in a balloon. Pretty soon I'm going to pop.

And he knows it, chuckling darkly, holding my hips still so he can ravage me with his mouth. I'm totally lost, clawing at the blanket, at his hands, and finally at the back of his head until he moans against me. The vibrations make my back arch and my toes curl, and oh, my god, I'm going to come. He's going to make me come on his tongue. I feel it. I want it.

And when it hits, I grit my teeth hard, my body straining, my heart pounding like a bass drum in my ears. It's the sweetest release, blissful, rolling over me in one wave after another until all that's left is peace. I'm completely wiped out by the time my legs fall open on either side of his head, and he stands, grunting, panting heavily as he stares down at me.

Without a word, he opens his belt, then unbuttons his shorts and lets them drop to the floor. He shoves a hand down his boxer briefs and pulls out his straining, dripping erection. For one heart-stopping second, I'm afraid he's going to make me suck it again. I'm not sure I have that in me now.

Instead, he runs his fist up and down, his eyes never leaving my twitching, pulsing core. I can only watch, both shocked and fascinated, while he touches himself, chest heaving, fist flying up and down, up and down.

And then he grunts and aims himself at my pussy before his cum shoots from the tip and hits my skin. I don't know what to feel, how to think. I knew this was something people did, but I never imagined it happening to me, never imagined feeling a man's cum running down my skin. I'm filled with surprise and more than a little bit of shame—which I think is exactly how he wants me to feel. That's why I can't show it. I can't let him see.

It's a good thing I'm so good at shutting down.

He doesn't say anything as he finishes and pulls himself together. What could he say? What would I even want to hear from him?

"Tell me you're not going to remember that and wish I would do it again." With a smirk, he backs away, snickering. While all I can do is wait for him to leave so I can get up on shaky legs and go to the bathroom to clean myself up.

He's right. Now that I know how that feels, I'll have a hard time not craving it. And he knows it.

That's not the worst part. It's not enough that he knows it. He takes pride in it. And he's not going to let me live it down.

THIRTEEN

Carter

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT.

Here we are, the happy family, surrounded by happy so-called friends. Not friends of mine, of course. I doubt Irene has any actual friends. These are all acquaintances of Dad's, colleagues, people he felt were important enough to join us during the rehearsal dinner.

It didn't matter when I reminded him the rehearsal dinner is supposed to be just for people involved with the wedding. Hell, even I know that. "Irene wants to meet as many people as possible before the wedding," he explained when I tried to be helpful. "So she won't be at a loss during the reception when everyone inevitably comes up to wish us well."

Pretty big-ass assumption there. Really, I'm proud of how I've managed to bite my tongue over and over throughout this process. No matter how much I want to point out to Dad how obvious Irene's gold-digging is, I have kept it to myself. He wants to be happy? Let him be. Let him delude himself into thinking this is what he needs. I can only try so hard to keep him from making a total fool of himself. Besides, he is the father; he is the one who's supposed to have the answers, not me. If anything, I resent the fact that I have to be the one to tell him what's so blatantly obvious.

That's just one of so many things I resent as I sit at a long table in a small banquet room at the country club where the ceremony and reception

are being held tomorrow. It's not enough that I have to sit here and watch Elliana pulling her scared-rabbit routine while she sits across from me.

I have to deal with the girl whose leg keeps brushing against mine under the table—Jocelyn Reid, daughter of Senator Martin Reid, somebody Dad is vaguely acquainted with. It didn't matter to Irene that they're not very close. As soon as she heard Dad knows the guy, she was dead set on having him at the rehearsal. "It's not everybody who can have a senator at such an important event," she reminded Dad more than once, to the point where I wanted to scream at her to stop being such an obvious opportunist.

The senator is sitting to Dad's left while Irene sits at his right, hanging onto the man's every word. That leaves me with his daughter, who happens to be my age and who has no problem letting me know she's interested. Extremely.

"We should get out of here early," she murmurs in my ear, sliding her foot up my leg where no one can see. "We can make some excuse or another. Believe me, nobody is going to mind if you're seen leaving with me."

She's right about that, and the thought makes me bristle. Yes, that is exactly what Dad wants. "Jocelyn is the sort of girl I would love to see you become involved with," he informed me earlier tonight when he told me she would be sitting next to me at dinner. "She has a great future in front of her. She knows the right people. You could go far with a woman like that in your life."

Maybe I should remind him I'm nineteen and nowhere near ready to settle down with anybody. Not even a girl with Jocelyn's big, baby-blue eyes and enormous tits. She's dressed modestly, and her dress covers all the interesting bits, but it's tight enough that it doesn't leave much to the imagination.

Wearing a smile that I hope looks polite, I turn my head in Dad's direction when he asks a question. "What was that?" I ask since I didn't hear him with Jocelyn whispering at me.

It doesn't really matter what he says. That's not what I'm interested in. No, what interests me is the way Elliana doesn't fix her face fast enough. When my gaze slides past her, it's dead obvious she's paying close attention to Jocelyn and me—and staring holes through both of us. Jocelyn mainly, almost glaring at her.

Interesting. Maybe the senator's daughter has a purpose, after all.

The fact is, my stepsister has gone out of her way to avoid me ever since the night I went down on her. It's been weeks of trying to catch her alone, trying to corner her at home, but she's too fast. She's even been helping Irene with last-minute wedding stuff. That's how I know she's going out of her way to stay as far from me as she can.

Most of the time, she's even getting rides with Wren and Maya. When I reminded her the girls don't owe her anything, she shrugged it off. I don't know where this new attitude came from, why she thinks she can get away with being so defiant. Eventually, it's going to catch up to her. She has to know that.

But it's all right. I've been willing to bide my time, because in the end, I'm going to be the one left standing. I'm the one with the photos on my phone. She can pretend all she wants to be in control, to dictate when and where we spend time together, but all she's doing is delaying the inevitable. Eventually, I'm going to hold them over her head again—and the longer I make her wait, the more she'll wonder when I'll decide to drop the hammer. No matter how she pretends otherwise, I know it's under her skin.

"Where would you want to go?" I ask Jocelyn, turning my attention back to her, speaking just loudly enough for her and Elliana to hear.

"I don't care," she replies with a knowing grin. "My apartment isn't far from here, actually. I would love to show you around."

"I would love to see it," I reply, deliberately letting my attention center on the cleavage that barely peeks out from the neckline of her dress. The thing is, I like being the pursuer. I think most guys do. It's one thing for a girl to be interested and even eager, but it's something different when she throws herself at a guy.

But she doesn't know that—and neither does the girl sitting across from me. She really needs to learn how to hide her jealousy. Up until now, she's been infuriatingly good at concealing her thoughts. What's changed?

I look her way across the table, and her gaze darts back down to her plate, where she's moving food around with her fork. "Don't you like the salmon?" I ask, because I don't feel like leaving well enough alone. Not with the opportunity to torture her right in front of me, like a shiny toy meant only for my amusement.

"I think it's delicious," Jocelyn announces, tossing golden hair over her shoulder before taking another bite.

Elliana shrugs, looking painfully uncomfortable in a light cotton dress and cardigan. It must be killing her, not being able to hide under one of her sweaters. That, plus Irene insisted she wear her contacts tonight so she wouldn't ruin any pictures.

All right, that's extremely shitty. It's one thing for me to make fun of her, but her own mother? It's not my problem, and I know it, but it doesn't exactly endear the woman to me. What kind of mom says something like that to her only daughter?

It gets worse, as it turns out. Once our plates are cleared away and we're waiting for dessert, Elliana excuses herself and heads for the restroom. It takes all of my self-control to stay where I am instead of following her, settling on watching her.

Until Irene gets up and follows her.

"Excuse me," I offer to Jocelyn without looking her way, getting up, doing what I can to look casual as I trail behind Irene. We're not the only ones taking the opportunity to stretch our legs between courses, so it doesn't look strange.

Rather than go straight to the men's room, I pause in front of the door to the ladies' room, where a certain familiar voice echoes on the other side. Why would Irene bother keeping her voice down when there are so many people who might overhear? Anybody could walk in at any second, but she's too determined to grind her daughter down to give a shit.

"You know, if you even tried to act like a normal person every once in a while, you could have somebody like that sitting with you too," she hisses. "There are plenty of young men who Paul knows—the sons of his colleagues and associates and friends. You think I wouldn't love to have the kind of daughter I would happily pair them up with? But no, you would rather be an embarrassment, sitting there like you're afraid of your own shadow. Do you know how that looks for us?"

This bitch. She doesn't know when to leave well enough alone. I can imagine the way Elliana must be standing in there, head down, shoulders hunched, absorbing her mother's hatred.

I have to step aside when I hear footsteps coming my way. Irene doesn't notice me as she returns to the table, all smiles—the gracious hostess. I really hope nobody but me heard what was going on in there. If only for Dad's sake. What would everybody think if they knew what his wife was really like?

When Elliana comes out, it's obvious she's been crying; her eyes are red, her face damp like she rinsed it. And when she sees me waiting near the door, her face falls, eyes narrowing. "What do you want?" she whispers, folding her arms, ducking her chin.

"Nothing." I mean, what is there to say? *Sorry your mom's a bitch?* Anyway, she does have a point. If Elliana could just loosen up and act like a regular person, she might actually enjoy her life a little.

"Well, go do nothing someplace else," she mutters. "I'm going home."

"So early? We haven't had dessert yet."

"Oh, no," she whispers, rolling her eyes. "How could I possibly miss dessert?"

When her chin trembles, it's obvious she's still hurting. Who wouldn't? "You need a ride?" It seems like the right thing to do.

I should know better by now. "What, and take you away from your new girlfriend? I wouldn't dream of it." She rolls her eyes and scoffs before walking away, her hips swinging with every quick step she takes. I wish I didn't want to stare. I really do.

Fuck it. She wants to act that way when all I'm trying to do is be nice for once? Let her. It's not my fault she can't fit in anywhere she goes. Jocelyn's wide smile greets me when I return to my seat, and I know I should try hard to match her energy.

But my heart's not in it. Not even close. She's gorgeous, she's got a killer body, but she does nothing for me. She's not a challenge. She's not even that interesting.

And if anything, the fact that Dad keeps looking our way wearing an approving smile makes her that much more unappealing. Since when do I do anything just because Dad wants me to? He should know better by now.

"You know, I think my stepsister is feeling kind of sick tonight. I should go home and check on her," I tell Jocelyn once people start saying their goodbyes after the dessert and coffee are gone. "It's a big day tomorrow. I think my dad would appreciate it if I kept an eye on her."

Instead of looking disappointed, she looks kind of pissed. "Well, aren't you the kind stepbrother?" she asks with a snort. "Here I was, thinking you wanted to have fun tonight. Thanks for the mixed signals."

I could continue with my excuse, remind her it's not my fault, but what's the use? It's all completely insincere, anyway. "I'll see you

tomorrow," I reply, since I figure she'll probably be at the wedding with her dad.

"Don't expect a hello," she mutters before standing and slinging her purse over her shoulder. So much for that. No big loss.

Everybody's too busy air-kissing and joking about the big day tomorrow to notice me slipping out. Did she make it home all right? Is she upset? How can she not be? How can Irene be so cruel? Not that I would put much past her—it's not like my opinion of her has fallen too far, since I didn't have a high opinion of her in the first place.

But still. She's a mother. Can't she at least pretend to like her own daughter? The question bounces around in my head throughout the drive home, leaving me feeling unsettled and unsure of myself by the time I roll up the driveway. I'm the only one who gets to torment Elliana, dammit.

She's exactly where I knew she would be. There's a light burning in her room when I reach the upstairs hallway. I listen for a little while, but don't hear anything coming from inside before I try the doorknob. No big surprise, she has made a habit of locking it lately. "It's me," I call out, knocking on the door. "I just wanted to check on you."

"What, are you already finished with your girl? Or is she in your room, waiting?" Fuck, she is bitter. Her voice is thick with emotion—she's probably been crying all alone.

"No, because I decided to come home and check on you," I snap. "Now open the door, because I'm tired of talking to it."

"Why should I?" Her voice gets a little louder, telling me she's coming my way. "What, you just can't resist the opportunity to make me feel like shit? Can I get one fucking night?"

Damn. When she decides to find her voice, she doesn't stop using it. "Maybe I wanted to see if you were all right. Is that unbelievable?"

She barks out a laugh before opening the door, dressed in the same sort of tank top and shorts she wore the night of the party. "Are you honestly asking me that question? Because yeah, it's plenty unbelievable. And I've already been through more than enough tonight, thank you very much."

She is so wounded. There is so much anger brewing in her. It touches something in me, lights it up, and makes it come to life.

She cranes her neck to look over my shoulder and tips her head to the side. "Wow. You really are alone. What, did Miss Senator's Daughter decide

you weren't good enough?" she asks, folding her arms and smiling for the first time all night.

"Don't start that shit just because you're jealous," I fire back.

"Jealous?" Her laughter rings out but it's too loud, almost forced. She's trying too hard.

"Give me a fucking break," I snarl when her laughter uncorks the anger I've tried to bottle up. "What, I don't have eyes? I couldn't see you watching us?"

"If you're paying attention to me," she retorts, "you couldn't have been paying very close attention to her. No wonder she told you to get lost."

"She didn't."

"She should have."

"Stop lying to yourself. It's pathetic," I snap, backing her into the room, kicking the door closed behind me. "We both know you like it when I touch you."

"You mean when you force me to do things? When you blackmail me?" She shuffles backward when I move toward her, the hunter stalking my prey.

"I'm not forcing you to like it, am I?" I murmur, watching her face change, watching pure bitterness touch her eyes, narrowing them, making her cheeks flush. Every ragged breath she takes makes her tits rise and fall so temptingly.

When the backs of her legs hit the bed, she has nowhere else to go, and I take advantage of that by lunging at her, surprising her into falling backward until she's propped up by her elbows.

"You come every single time." Leaning down, my hands on either side of her body, I whisper, "Tonight, I'll make you come as many times as I want to. And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

FOURTEEN

Elliana

IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER, lying back on my elbows, staring up into his eyes. I meet his gaze without blinking, without flinching, because I won't let him see my fear. I won't make it that easy.

An eternity locked in a silent battle. Him smirking, me trying not to shake.

"You can try," he murmurs, the sound something between a growl and caress. "Go ahead. Try to stop me. I could use the laugh."

"You think you're intimidating?" Somehow, I even laugh a little while my insides go hot as lava. It's his nearness. It's the reminder of what he's been able to do to my body before now.

And what he could do again.

A brief, nasty smile tips the corners of his mouth upward. "I'm not trying to be intimidating, but I can be if that's what you want." Dipping his head lower, he brushes his lips ever so slightly over my neck, just enough to make goosebumps cover my skin. "It's up to you."

"If it's up to me, you would get off me." No, he would rather grab my wrists and give them a quick tug, pulling my elbows from under me, making me land flat on my back. My hands are above my head before I know what's happening, wrists pinned by one of his hands.

"You sure about that?" His free hand slithers under my tank top, closing over one of my boobs. Like magic, my nipple hardens, and he laughs.

“That’s what I thought. Why do you bother lying to yourself? You know you love this.”

The worst part? When he rolls his hips to grind his thick erection against my pussy, I can’t pretend he’s wrong. It feels too good—the friction, the heat. A flood is starting to build, and it’s going to be intense once it’s released.

But there’s still a tiny part of me that doesn’t want to make it easy for him. Maybe I need to be able to tell myself I didn’t make it easy. I need to keep my dignity so I can look at myself in the mirror afterward.

So even though I have to fight the urge to grind against him so I can ease the pressure that’s building in my core, I force a laugh. “Is that what you need to tell yourself so you feel like a big, hot man? Maybe the senator’s daughter decided you weren’t man enough for her, so now you have to prove it to yourself?”

The words are barely out of my mouth when I know I’ve made a mistake. I took it too far. Something races across his face, something dark and dangerous.

My heart starts pounding painfully while his grip on my wrists tightens until I feel my bones grinding together. “Is that what you think happened? I think we both know it’s not. I mean...”

Need explodes between my legs when he grinds harder, driving himself against me until I can barely hold back a whimper. “You come like a faucet when I touch you. But let’s talk about the senator’s daughter. You sure were paying attention to us tonight. Why were you staring at us and clocking every move?”

“Because you were in front of me,” I whisper, doing everything I can not to writhe against him as the pleasure starts to build. I wouldn’t stop him now if he stuck his hand down my shorts. I wish he would. My hips lift without me meaning them too, and I have to grind my teeth to hold back a moan.

He squeezes my boob, thumbing the nipple until the blood racing through my veins turns to lava. My back arches against him because there’s no hope. I can’t fight this. It doesn’t matter how I know I should. There’s no such thing as winning once his hands are on me.

“Keep telling yourself that.” His hot breath makes me shiver, traveling over my skin until his mouth is maybe an inch from mine. “Just like you can keep telling yourself you don’t like this.” My lips tingle when his barely

brush against them. I'm lost. Gone, whimpering. My slit is a river by the time his tongue brushes across my parted lips before dipping into my mouth.

Oh, yes. My body sinks into the mattress, every last ounce of resistance melting away. I match him stroke for stroke, fire racing through me, making me do things I would never dream of. Like showing him how much I want this.

"So easy to get excited." But he can't pretend this isn't doing something to him. He's breathing faster, harder, grinding his dick against me while I lift my hips, tilting them so he can rub against my pussy.

My head drops back as his lips trace a trail of flame down my throat. He still has me pinned—I fight, tugging my arms, but he won't let go. "I like you this way," he whispers against my boobs before yanking the tank top up over my chest and pulling one of my nipples between his lips.

Pleasure explodes like a bomb, sending shockwaves through me. I'm already so wet and aching hard enough to hurt, but now I'm sure this will kill me. It feels too good. I can't live through it. My heart can't take it.

"Mm..." His deep, throaty moan makes my hips roll to meet his grinding. I look down at him and our eyes meet when he lifts his head away from my chest, where my boobs glisten with his saliva. "Your skin is so sweet."

Then he needs to taste more. I don't have the nerve to say that out loud, and I can't even believe the thought came to my head. I can only arch my back again, offering him more of me, anything he can touch or taste.

"Is somebody in a hurry?" A different kind of heat flushes my skin when he laughs at the way I raise my hips the second he grazes my waistband. Damn him. It's not bad enough he has this power over me? He has to laugh about it, too?

"That's okay. I'm in a hurry, too." The dark, dangerous gleam in his eyes makes my heart stutter, then take off double time once he starts easing the shorts over my ass and down my legs. "In a hurry to taste this pussy. You like it when I do that, don't you?"

This can't be happening, can it? He's not really kneeling in front of me, spreading my thighs wider, rubbing the faint scruff on his cheeks across my sensitive skin. He's not really teasing my slick lips with his thumbs before parting them so he can stare at my throbbing clit. He can't be.

“So pretty.” He extends his tongue, and my breath catches as the realization of what he’s done to me washes over me all at once.

And then he’s on me, lapping at me, dragging his tongue through my folds and over my swollen clit, pulsing, driving me out of my mind with a kind of pleasure I didn’t know was possible. Not until him, not until now.

It’s almost unfair, him being so good at this. Making me whimper as he licks me again and again, teasing me by lingering at my entrance, circling it before going back to my clit so he can lick it like his life hangs in the balance.

I can’t help it. I can’t hold back. “God… oh, Carter… that’s… so…”

“It’s so what?”

My eyes fly open, and I look down the length of my body to find him grinning. “Tell me.”

“Don’t stop!” My hips jerk upward, and I reach for him, ready to pull him down because, my god, I was so close.

“Oh? You want this all of a sudden?” His blue eyes are filled with enough wickedness to make me hate him more than I ever have.

But I need him. “Carter...” It’s a whimper, and I hate the sound of it, but my body has needs, and he’s using it against me.

“You wanna come? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” He never breaks eye contact as he leans in again, this time focusing all of his attention on my clit. Yes. I sink back against the mattress, my head rolling from side to side, as I start to drown in sensation all over again. His tongue on me, making me burn. The soft sheets under me. I’m more alive than I’ve ever been, soaring, wrapped up in the moment. Wrapped up in him.

Until I’m not.

I can’t help the groan of complete frustration that bursts out of me when his tongue goes away all of a sudden. “No!” I groan.

“No, you don’t want to come?”

“No, don’t stop!” He knows what I mean. My body is one throbbing nerve, and he wants to play games.

“So you didn’t want to come? Use your words.” His thumb skims my swollen flesh, sliding through my wetness, and I let out a tormented cry.

“Yes! Yes, please!”

“That’s it. Beg me, Elli. Make me know how much you need it.” His tongue darts out to flick the tip of my clit, and I scream because it’s all too

much. My heart's going to explode, and I can barely breathe. It's so good, too good.

"Please, please! Let me come. Make me come." I would say anything, do anything. My hips are rolling, my body a coiled spring ready to pop.

"I don't know. I don't think you've proven how much you want to."

"Jesus Christ! Let me come!" I thrust my hips against his face, and it must convince him. Maybe he's afraid I'll break his nose.

Either way, he buries his face against me, grunting, panting, working me until the tension is too much and my body has no choice but to give in. To take what it wants more than anything.

And when the wave crashes and pulls me under, there is nothing but relief. Nothing but bliss radiating through me, making my thighs close around his head as I ride it out. He doesn't stop, either, dragging every ounce of sensation from my body until I pretty much collapse with a breathless whimper. My strength is gone, my body drained in the best way.

"You convinced me." His voice sounds like it's coming from far away. I'm still floating on a cloud. It was so much more intense, probably because he left me hanging like he did.

It's only when he spreads my thighs wide again that my eyes open. He's standing between them now, naked, with his erection jutting out in front of him. His tip is glistening, and he rubs his precum over the head and down his shaft with a few strokes from his fist.

"You think you have another one in you? Think you could come on my cock tonight?" He must see the fear that grips me all at once, since he smiles at my sharp gasp. "What? You afraid it will be too much for you?"

Honestly? Yes. And he must know that. He must know he's been my first in every way so far.

But when my body tenses once he gets closer, running his head along my slit, he only chuckles. "You'll get used to it. Just breathe."

"Wait. I don't—" But it's too late. My brain hasn't had a chance to catch up before I feel the pressure down there, the sudden feeling of being too full. That's it. My virginity is gone. He took it without even asking.

But instead of shoving himself in the way he shoved himself into my mouth, he pauses, one arm wrapped around each thigh. "Relax." His jaw is clenched tight, like he's being tortured, but he waits. Is that normal?

Does it matter? Slowly, my body starts to adjust to his presence. He senses that, he must, because he starts to move forward, filling me up more,

stretching me until I don't think I can take anymore. I'm standing on the line between pain and pleasure, but even the pain sort of feels good.

It doesn't last long. It fades as he pulls back and fills me again. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, what I'm supposed to think. This is a deeper satisfaction than when his tongue is on me.

"You like that?" he whispers, wrapping my legs around his hips. I lock them behind him out of instinct, feeling the way his ass flexes and clenches with each slow, measured stroke.

"Yes," I whisper. "Yes. I like it."

"You're so fucking tight... snap me in half..." His eyes close, his hands now moving over my body, fondling me, playing with me while he keeps moving. In and out, a slow rhythm, and every stroke takes the pressure building in my core and pushes it higher. Farther.

And by the time his thumb finds my clit so he can stroke it in time with his movements inside me, I know it's going to happen again. I'm going to come, the way he wants me to. The way I want to.

"So close... fuck, Elli... tighter..." He moves a little faster, a little deeper, and I have never wanted anything more than this. Than for him to fuck me. It feels too good.

It's going to happen. I take one last look at him, standing at the foot of the bed, abs flexing, his skin flushed, before closing my eyes to absorb the perfection of his wide dick moving rhythmically. "Oh..." I whimper. "God, yes."

"My cock feels good inside you?" he pants. "Are you going to cream all over it?"

His filthy words only make everything more intense. "Yes!" I shout, desperate for the tension to break. "Yes, yes! Fuck me!"

I'm completely lost, aren't I?

But it doesn't feel bad, especially once the tension breaks all at once, and I shatter into a thousand pieces around him. Nothing makes sense. I don't know who I am. I only know I'm coming hard, shaking and moaning by the time he pulls back and aims his dick, so his cum lands on my pussy.

"Oh, fuck, yeah!" he almost roars, with his head thrown back, his eyes closed, and a look of pure bliss washing over his face before his fist starts to slow. He then releases a long, deep sigh, his gaze landing on me. A slow smile spreads—knowing, maybe a little smug.

He's not going to ruin this, is he? I'm lying here with my shirt up around my chest, and my legs are still spread. I'm out of breath, hoarse, more vulnerable than I've been in a long time. Maybe ever. He wouldn't destroy me by making a sarcastic comment, would he?

"Wait right there." That's all he says before he goes to the bathroom, flipping on the light before turning on the water in the sink. My head is spinning, and I'm almost afraid to move. Like I'll only break the strange spell over me if I do. What just happened?

It's not long before he comes back with a washcloth. When he touches it to my skin, wiping away the cum he left behind, he's gentle. He takes his time.

I can't understand him.

I have to say something once he's finished. I can't let this moment pass in silence. But when my mouth opens, the first thing I think to say is, "Are you always this nice to girls you blackmail into having sex with you?"

He's wearing a tiny frown as he backs away, going to the bathroom and tossing the washcloth in the direction of the sink. "Is that what I did?" he asks, moving toward the door after collecting his clothes. "Because the way I remember it. I didn't have to blackmail you into anything. You did that because you wanted to."

I open my mouth, ready to argue... until I realize he's right. There is no argument. He didn't blackmail me into having sex with him. At least not verbally.

The last thing I see is his knowing smirk before he steps into the hall and closes the door, leaving me to wonder how I'm supposed to protect myself when I lose a little more of who I thought I was every time he touches me.

FIFTEEN

Carter

WELL, it's done. And that is pretty much the best thing I can think to say about the spectacle that's been unfolding around me all day.

That, and Dad looks beyond happy. I'm glad for him. I only hope she doesn't make him regret it.

It's exhausting, putting on a happy face for hours on end. I'm pretty sure my facial muscles are going to cramp by the time the night is over. I figure this is the least I can do for Dad—when he looks through pictures later, he'll see photographic evidence that I did my best to play along today. He'll know I did it for his sake.

"Champagne?" I can barely hear the voice of the server over the music, threatening to split my head open. The theme for the night was obviously '80s and '90s, as loud as possible. I'm pretty sure that had to be the only instruction Irene gave the DJ. It wouldn't even be bad if it wasn't so fucking loud—and this is me, somebody whose closest neighbor once recorded the music I was listening to while they were out of the house, which was audible at a distance even with every window closed. If I think it's too loud, there's a problem.

I'm glad to take the flute from the tray before the girl walks past, though I could go for something stronger. That's another favor I'm doing for Dad tonight: taking it easy with the drinking since I'm not exactly of legal age. It would look kind of shitty for the underage son of the town's police chief to

stumble around drunkenly, but champagne is celebratory. I'm just enjoying the festivities.

Sipping the bubbly, I make a slow tour of the ballroom, wondering how long I have to stick around. I'm trying to be polite. I'm trying to play along, but it's been a long day. I would be exhausted enough without adding on the weight of pretending to be happy. Dad is out on the dance floor, bowtie loose and hanging around his neck, doing what I guess he considers dancing—but it looks like something out of an old monster movie. He wouldn't notice if I was gone. He's too busy having fun.

“Frankenstein.”

Hearing the name makes me turn my head, confused, looking for the source. A certain maid of honor in a floor-length, lilac-purple dress lifts her champagne flute in my direction, then gestures toward the dance floor with it. “That’s who he reminds me of when he dances.”

Elliana would be so pretty if she let herself be soft like this all the time. Somebody arranged her hair, so instead of it hanging limp around her shoulders and face, it’s gently curled and shining. Whoever did her makeup made her eyes pop—her glossy lips curve in a wry smirk as she lifts the champagne flute to them. “But it’s embarrassing the hell out of Mom, so I hope he never stops.”

“How much of that have you had?” Because she’s more open right now than she’s ever been. Like her walls have come down. I doubt that all has to do with what happened last night. If anything, she was giving me the cold shoulder today as we were forced to pose for photos together. I’ve had weeks of practice. It didn’t come as a big surprise.

Clearly, she’s in the same place I am right now: a little tipsy and too damn tired to care. Instead of answering my question, she heaves a sigh while looking over the lavishly decorated room. “Do you think there’s a flower left in town?” she asks. “I hope nobody else is expecting to find any this weekend.”

The thought of flowers reminds me of something. “Are you going to go out there and try to catch the bouquet later?”

She rolls her eyes, scoffing. “Are you kidding? Even if I wanted to, Mom would probably tell me not to waste my time.” Her voice shakes a little before she looks away.

I remember clearly everything Irene said to her last night. I think I would rather have no mother at all than a mother who would make me feel

that small and worthless.

I don't know why, but there's something in me that wants to make her feel better. It has to be the champagne, or the exhaustion. "You look nice today."

"Oh. Thank you. I hate this dress," she mumbles, picking at the light, gauzy fabric. Yeah, I guess she would hate it. It's sleeveless, low cut enough in the front to show cleavage. Everything she always tries to avoid.

"You look nicer than a lot of the women here." I plop down into the chair next to hers, glad to get off my feet in a pair of dress shoes I didn't remember to break in before today. I thought only women were supposed to complain about aching feet at events like this.

Gesturing with my flute, I lean a little closer to her so she can hear me. "Look at those cougars over there on the dance floor. Friends of your mom's?"

She giggles, shaking her head. "Mom wishes. They're wives of some of your dad's friends."

"Yeah, I guess I didn't recognize them with all that makeup. Did they use a putty knife to put it on?" She laughs, and I laugh, and we watch the trio of women dancing around with their shoes in their hands, shaking their asses.

"So I look better than a bunch of middle-aged women. I don't know if that's really a compliment." But her eyes are shining when they meet mine, and there's a heartbeat when we're just two people sitting together at a wedding—the most normal thing in the world.

But her smile fades quickly, replaced with a frown. "I know what you think of her. I mean, it's not like you try to make it a secret or anything. And I'm not trying to start shit," she adds when I lean back in the chair with a sigh. "I understand how you feel. I would feel the same way. This whole thing makes my skin crawl."

Well, son of a bitch. So this is what it takes to turn her into a regular person and not some always-spooked robot who scurries through life like a timid little mouse. "What, because I have to be your stepbrother?"

"Do you want an honest answer to that?" But she's grinning as she shrugs. "I mean, you haven't exactly made it easy. But it's just all so... obvious. Painfully obvious. She doesn't know how trashy she makes herself look, how embarrassing she is. And I hate..." All of a sudden, her bottom

lip almost disappears under her teeth before her head snaps back around, avoiding my gaze.

But it's too late for that. "What? Go ahead," I prompt. I never would've expected being able to relate to her—and now that it seems like I can, I want to know more.

Looking at me from the corner of her eye, I can sense her sizing me up. Wondering about my motive. Can she trust me? Can I blame her for wondering that? "I hate thinking people might, you know, lump me in with her. I hate that they would figure we're the same kind of person because nothing could be further from the truth." Then she tosses back the rest of her champagne all at once.

"Careful," I warn her, laughing. "All that sugar. You're gonna have a hell of a hangover."

"Whatever. I don't have any plans tomorrow." She has definitely loosened up, and I can't pretend I don't like what I'm seeing. There's something so tempting about her right now. It's more than the memory of being inside her last night, that barrier between us demolished. It's more than a feeling of possessiveness or ownership or anything like that. Feeling free and easy, she's somebody I wouldn't mind spending more time with.

"When do you think we can get out of here?" When it sounds like she's going to choke on her tongue, I add, "I've been dying to go ever since we finished dinner. I mean, unless you feel like hanging around here and watching your mom start a conga line or some weird shit."

"I think usually people wait until the cake is cut." She eyes the monstrous six-tier cake on the other side of the room, chewing her lip again.

"Do you really think anybody would care if we missed that?" Standing, I button my tuxedo jacket and look down at her expectantly. "I'm going to go with or without you. We've had about enough of pretending for one night."

She's torn—until she isn't. "Fine. I'll go with you. I can always say I had a headache or something."

"See? We're getting along like siblings are supposed to. Our parents will be so proud." I can't help but laugh when she rolls her eyes. I think the champagne is affecting both of us, but it's not a bad thing. For the first time in a long time, it feels like I have an ally.

Even if that ally comes from the last place I would ever expect.

It doesn't take long to get an Uber—we rode in the limousine straight from the house, meaning there's no car for me to drive home. The party is still raging by the time our car rolls up, and the drunken shouts still audible behind us make me glad we decided to cut out early. The drunker everyone gets, the more insufferable it's all going to become.

There's something almost nice about riding home with her, comparing notes on the day. In her lap, she holds a small purse and a bouquet of ribbon-wrapped peonies and roses. She's smiling, obviously relieved to be out of the spotlight, away from people asking all kinds of rude questions about how life has changed and what it's like fitting into a new family. A few of them must have recognized her from around town since they made a big deal of commenting on how much nicer she looks today, how they didn't know she was so pretty. I mean, not that I disagree, but I at least have a little tact.

By the time we get home, there's only one thing on my mind. The night air is humid, and I've been in this fucking tuxedo all day. "I'm gonna go for a swim," I announce once we're in the house, going straight for the kitchen and the doors leading out back. "Come with me."

"I'm not going to swim."

I stop at the firm, no-nonsense sound of her voice and turn on my heel while taking off my jacket. She's standing at the foot of the stairs, one hand gripping the banister while she stares at me. Her eyes don't look quite as wide as they do when she's wearing her glasses, but they're close.

"I'll be a good boy, I promise." I even hold up my right hand before using it to undo my bowtie. "Come on. Don't make me swim alone."

"I'm not swimming. But I'll come out with you." She pauses to take off her heeled sandals, then follows me while I shed one piece of clothing after another. My shirt ends up slung over the back of a kitchen chair before I step outside, where right away I undo my belt and kick off my shoes.

"I still don't know why you won't. What, are you afraid I'll drown you or something?" I pause and look over my shoulder, laughing—because it was a joke—just in time to watch her face fall, then harden.

"I'm only kidding," I mutter, but she doesn't react right away. Instead of looking at me, acknowledging me, she stares at the pool, sitting in the first chair she comes to.

"I don't swim, okay? I just don't." Her shoulders are starting to rise. She's about to go back into hiding, and I can't believe how much I want to

stop her from doing it. Is it too much to ask that we have a single night where she doesn't act like I'm the Grim Reaper?

"What, you just never learned how? It's easy. And probably safer if you do learn," I add as I drop my pants, letting them puddle at my feet before stepping out and taking off my socks. She hasn't moved by the time I'm down to my boxer briefs, which I wait to take off. She's got my interest. I don't know why, but something is compelling me to understand her. Maybe it's the champagne, maybe it's that little flicker of camaraderie we shared at the reception. For whatever reason, I stop what I'm doing to watch her, to wait for an explanation.

"I can swim. I just don't want to. I had... an incident a few years ago. In high school," she murmurs, grabbing one arm with the other hand and ducking her head a little. "I don't know why I thought it would be okay for me to go to a party when I'd never gone to one before. Mom kind of pushed me into it, which I'm sure does not come as a surprise."

She's right. It doesn't. I keep my thoughts to myself, since it seems like she's on a roll.

She's staring at the water, and the lights from the pool dance over her face with every ripple on the surface. Leaning forward, she wraps her arms around her knees. "I was minding my own business. I wasn't trying to talk to anybody. I wasn't trying to show off. I just wanted to be there. For once. I wanted to be a part of something. But that was too much to ask."

Her laughter is sharp, bitter. "I was sitting in a chair, kind of like this one, drinking a soda. I was still dressed. I felt uncomfortable, but I told myself to deal with it. I couldn't just spend my whole life ignoring things that made me uncomfortable. That was what Mom always said to me, you know? I figured she was right, so I forced myself to sit there. Just to sit. Not to make conversation or flirt with any of the guys. I wouldn't have known where to start." Her gaze drops to the patio at her feet.

"What happened?" I ask, going to her, lowering myself into a chair next to her. Watching every move she makes, every twitch of her face.

She presses her lips together so tight they disappear while a shudder runs over her. "Two guys got a hold of me, one on each arm. And they were laughing, and everybody was cheering, and I didn't know what was happening until they pulled me to the edge of the pool. I still thought they were joking because, you know, everybody was laughing and clapping. I almost started to laugh too—that's the saddest part. I started to laugh

because I honestly thought stupidly that we were all having fun together. I'm so ashamed of how stupid I was."

She lifts a shoulder, then mumbles, "Then I realized they were going to throw me into the deep end. I started asking for them to stop, please stop, but they weren't listening. They just... threw me in."

"Fuck," I mutter.

"And then there were these girls who were already in the water." Now she's talking faster, with an edge in her voice as anger leaks in and colors the story. "And I reached for one of them because I was panicking. My clothes were pulling me down, and I was trying to hold onto something to keep me floating, but all she did was shove me down. They took turns pushing me under the water. When I tried to get to the edge, they wouldn't let me." Her voice cracks before she shudders again.

"I still hear all of it so clearly in my head. And I was splashing and gulping water and then I went under again..."

Her eyes close and a single tear trickles down her cheek, sparkling like a jewel in the light dancing across her face. "And I was so sure I was going to die. I kept reaching out for help, and they kept shoving me, pushing me back under. I was so sure I was dying. And they didn't care. An adult finally showed up and told them to stop playing around. Finally, they let me swim to the edge, and I pulled myself out. And you know what? They sounded disappointed. They really, honestly did."

"Sick fucks," I grunt in disgust.

I didn't expect her head to snap around the way it does or for her eyes to blaze as brightly as they do. "Really? Are they? Because it seems like no matter where I go, no matter what I do, I end up being the butt of somebody's joke. Somebody decides they're going to make my life miserable just because I exist. Does that sound familiar?"

I don't know what's harder to believe: the way she was so quick to turn things around on me, or the fire in her voice. I've always known that fire had to exist in her. I've seen flashes of it before. But now it's blazing, and it's directed at me.

"I had my reasons." And I still do, don't I? Nothing has changed, really. Right?

"Everybody always thinks they've got their reasons. I never did anything to you to deserve the way you've treated me. And I'm not going to sit here now and listen to you justify yourself."

She's out of the chair and on her feet before I can say a word. "Wait," I blurt out, getting up and reaching for her. She tries to yank herself out of my grasp, but she should know better by now. I don't give up that easily.

"Let go of me," she growls, and I guess I'm supposed to be intimidated, but all it does is make me more determined to pull her in close. To smell her hair. To feel her tremble against me, the way she does when I wrap an arm around her waist to hold her in place. "Do you have a problem understanding English? I said to let me go."

I don't do anything unless I want to, and I don't want to let her go. I would rather test the softness of her hair, the smoothness of her cheek. Her heart is fluttering like crazy, her pulse pounding in her throat when my fingers trail over her skin.

I'm looking at her, but all I can see is a girl getting pushed under the water, panicking, thinking she's going to die. Right now, I would kill every last one of them while she watches, just to show her not everybody's like that. Whoever the fuck they are, they don't deserve to live.

Something stirs deep in me. I slide a finger under her chin, tipping her head back and holding it there so I can claim her mouth. She goes stiff at first, but that's no surprise. I part her lips with my tongue and kiss her slowly, deeply, taking the time to indulge in her like I never have. She's been through so much. I've added to it. Maybe this kiss is an apology. Maybe it's my way of telling her I see her, all of her, when I can't find the words.

With a soft sigh, she melts against me, her hands moving over my bare chest, sparking a fire that covers me in a heated flush. A low growl stirs in my throat, and she shivers as the kiss deepens, both of us breathing faster, something deep and needful urging me on. I don't know what I'm doing. I only know I have to. It feels right—that's the craziest part of all. I'm not doing it to embarrass her or control her. I'm doing it because I want to.

And she wants it, too, nails digging into my shoulders, her breathing quick and desperate. Her body is alive in my arms, moving against me, my hands gliding over the fabric of her dress and teasing the curves underneath. Fuck, she is so much more than she seemed, and I'm hungry to learn every inch of her. What else is hiding, waiting to be discovered?

I can't help taking hold of her ass and gripping it, pulling her against my cock.

Which is exactly when she freaks, going stiff. The hands that were just clutching my shoulders like I was all she wanted now loosen, so she can press them against my chest like she wants to push me away. “No,” she mumbles, turning her face away from mine. “No. This isn’t happening.”

“Why the fuck not?” I ask while she shoves hard enough to catch me off guard and make me stumble backward. That’s her opportunity, and she takes it, breaking away from me, running into the house with her dress bunched up in her hands.

“Wait! Would you wait?” This isn’t me. I don’t chase women. They chase me—all I ever have to do is decide which one I’ll let catch me for a little while before I get bored. So why am I running through my house, just a little too slow to catch her?

She only speaks once, when she reaches the top of the stairs. “Just leave me alone, please!” I reach her bedroom in time to hear the lock click, closing her off from me.

I wish I knew why I can’t get her to give me a chance. To trust me a little.

I wish I knew why it matters so much.

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SIXTEEN

Elliana

“NOW REMEMBER. No funny business around here.” You would think Mom owns the house, the way she wags a finger in our faces while Paul finishes loading their luggage into the car he arranged to pick them up and take them to the airport.

“I think we can handle it.” I’m lying. I don’t have the first clue how we’re going to handle being alone in this house for two entire weeks while our parents frolic in Thailand. I don’t know what to expect from Carter.

After last night, I don’t know what to expect from myself, because there was a second or two when it seemed like a very good idea to let him do whatever he wanted, for as long as he wanted.

I wouldn’t be face-to-face with him now if it wasn’t for Mom shouting for me to come downstairs to say goodbye. I’m pretty sure they didn’t get home until around three o’clock this morning—Mom stumbled drunkenly in the hallway and woke me up with her laughter.

But nobody would ever know, looking at her now. I think she might still be drunk, actually, still riding high. She got what she wanted: the chance to show off in front of half the town and prove to them she’s just as good as they are.

“Don’t worry,” Carter offers. He’s being strangely charming toward her right now, which, to say the least, is a huge change. “I will keep her in line while you’re gone.”

“I’ll have to count on you, I guess.” She’s practically glowing, giggling as she swats his arm in a playful gesture. She turns away, but I don’t, meaning I get to see the way his mouth twists in a smirk.

Paul waves up at us. “You two okay? Do you think you can handle it while we’re gone?”

“We’ll be fine,” Carter calls out while I shake like a leaf inside. “Get out of here or you’ll miss your flight.”

“He’s right!” Mom trills, almost skipping in her mile-high sandals. “We better go. They won’t hold the plane for us, even though we are newlyweds.”

Don’t go. Right, like she would listen. It’s not like I actually want her to stay. I’m psyching myself out, that’s all. If anything, Carter and I are getting along better than we used to. I have nothing to worry about.

Other than myself. Can I trust myself around him? I can’t believe I have to ask that question.

We both wave as the car pulls down the driveway. As soon as it’s turned onto the street, rolling out of view, Carter releases a long breath. “Fuck. I need a drink.”

And here we go. Day one.

I would remind him it’s only ten o’clock in the morning, but then I don’t think he really means it. The less I say to him, the better. Just because he’s not actively going out of his way to make my life miserable right now doesn’t mean we have to spend a ton of time together. It’s safer if we don’t —no chance of me getting all caught up in my hormones and possibly throwing myself at him. The way I came close to doing last night.

And all because he was nice to me. Because he listened, because he seemed to care, because he kissed me in a way that said more than a thousand words ever could.

But then I had a lot of champagne, and so did he, and I was probably telling myself what I needed to believe.

I’m halfway to the stairs when he clears his throat. “Where do you think you’re going?”

What a wonderful way to start off our two weeks together. After taking a slow breath, I turn his way. “Up to my room. I was thinking about getting a little more sleep.”

“What, you mean your graceful mom woke you up too?” He snorts, then tips his head toward the living room. “Hang out with me.”

“I’m pretty tired. I won’t be any fun.”

Snorting, he retorts, “I don’t expect fun. Just somebody to hang out with.”

“Oh, that’s definitely the way to sweet-talk a girl into spending time with you.”

“Come on.” He scrubs a hand over his head, then yawns. “Just hang out with me. I don’t feel like being alone.”

Just when I think he’s showing me his human side, his decent side, he has to go and prove me wrong. “Unless you want me to show those photos around. They’re still on my phone, you know.”

This prick. He seems awfully comfortable blackmailing people into spending time with him. If I didn’t think he would make me sorry for it, I might say that out loud.

How can he be so concerned and almost caring one minute, then blackmail me like this? It can’t be because he actually wants to spend time with me—no way would I believe that. So what is it? Why should I even bother trying to figure it out? It’s a waste of time. He’s an enigma.

“Do you like Marvel movies?” he asks, flopping down on the sofa with the remote in hand.

Does he really want to watch an actual movie? “I’ve never watched any.”

“Seriously?” He looks up at me like he’s waiting for a punchline, like he genuinely can’t believe it. “Okay, we have to start from the beginning so you can catch up.”

When did I ever say I wanted to catch up with anything? “You can watch whatever you want. I won’t really care.”

“No. We’re watching *Iron Man*. That one came out first. I think you’ll like it,” he decides, pulling the movie up.

“I’ve heard of it.” In fact, I think I’ve seen a little bit. Well, at least he’s not asking me to do anything humiliating or disgusting. “Mind if I get something to eat? Do you want anything?”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s do that first.” He actually seems like he’s in a pretty good mood as we go to the kitchen. I figured he’d be pissed at me for running away from him last night, but he hasn’t brought it up. I’m not going to mention it if he’s willing to let it go. Maybe he’s growing up a little. A girl can dream.

It's not long before we're sitting down with glasses of cold brew, bagels, and yogurt. I'm still not sure what his motives are, but by the time we start the movie and I'm halfway through my bagel, I don't feel entirely uneasy. I can even let myself sink into the story, which is a lot funnier and wittier than I expected.

Everything's fine until I glance Carter's way. He's grinning, at peace as he watches the movie on the other end of the sofa. He looks younger, somehow. At ease.

But all I can think about is last night. There was something different in his kiss. The way he held me close. Even the briefest thought has my heart beating faster until I have to look away, back toward the TV. Staring at him is too dangerous.

But a few glances aren't any better. I can't help it. Every time he moves—stretching his legs out, crossing his ankles on the coffee table, folding his arms—it attracts my attention. I can't help the impulse to study his muscular legs, visible thanks to the loose shorts he's wearing. His arms, so thick, remind me of what a challenge it was to remove myself from his embrace.

My attention drifts to his crotch just when he glances my way at the worst possible time. *Dammit*. I look away, but my cheeks are hot. He has to know what I was thinking.

And he does, and of course, nothing's going to stop him from rubbing it in my face. "See something you like?" he asks, sounding smug, like only he can.

"I was just looking over." And now I'm staring at the TV, but of course, I've lost track of the story.

"Maybe you should come a little closer so you won't have to look." I scoff and roll my eyes. But he's like a dog with a bone when he gets an idea in his head. "Come on. Sit over here in my lap."

And there goes my whole body, going hot. "I'm comfortable over here."

"It's not an invitation. It's an order." He pauses, then adds, "Don't forget, I have those pictures of you. I don't think sitting in my lap is such a punishment. Unless you want everybody to see them—"

"Okay, okay." Really, he needs to get some new material. I hate having to do as he says, but I hate not trusting him even more. I can't put anything past him.

And maybe, just maybe, I don't hate the idea of sitting in his lap. But I'd rather bite off my own tongue than admit it.

He takes his feet off the coffee table and plants them on the floor, patting his thighs. I roll my eyes before climbing over and settling in—slowly, not all at once.

So of course, he has to make a big deal about it. "You're so stiff." There's laughter in his voice because, of course, he's enjoying making me as uncomfortable as possible. But he doesn't take advantage the way I thought he immediately would. One of his arms is draped over the arm of the couch, while he rests the other on a throw pillow he tosses across my thighs. There's no hint of trying to grope or tickle or anything like that.

I seriously wish I could make sense of him. I thought for sure he would find a way to get back at me for rejecting him last night, but right now, he's being nicer to me than he ever has. Granted, he's sort of forcing me into it, but not so he can be cruel or anything.

Slowly, I relax, leaning against him. By the time Tony Stark announces he's Iron Man, I can laugh genuinely. "That was good! How many of those are there?"

"There are three *Iron Man* movies, but like more than thirty movies in the Marvel universe."

I hope he doesn't think that's how we're spending the next two weeks. "And you watched all of them?"

"A lot of people have." When I can't help but widen my eyes in surprise, he snickers. "What? Why is that so unbelievable?"

Because I can't make this new image of him line up with the guy who throws naked parties when his dad's out of town. "I don't know. I wouldn't have guessed."

"I think there are probably a lot of things you wouldn't guess." He winks with a smirk. "Like how not everybody's out to hurt you all the time. It took you a little while to relax, but nothing bad happened, right?"

And there goes any goodwill that was built up today. With a sinking heart, I climb out of his lap and straighten my long-sleeved cardigan with trembling hands. For once, it's not fear making me tremble.

"Thanks for throwing that in my face," I whisper.

His head snaps back—can he genuinely be surprised? "I wasn't trying to throw anything in your face."

And yet somehow, he did. “Whatever. Thanks for the movie. I’m going up to my room now.”

It’s just safer this way. Better, easier.

I’m barely halfway up the stairs when he calls out from the sofa. “You can’t stay up there for two solid weeks, you know.”

We’ll see about that.

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SEVENTEEN

Carter

“ALL I’M SAYING IS, you have two whole weeks. Plenty of time for another party.”

It’s getting harder to laugh off Preston’s constant party talk. “I’m starting to think you only hang around me for the parties.” I slowly swim past him, splashing him once I’m close enough.

“That’s pretty low,” he rumbles, running his fingers through his hair to comb it back from his forehead. “I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say that.”

“Don’t get all bitchy on me.” I glance over at his twin, hanging out on one of the lounge chairs, and he only shakes his head slowly.

“He just wants to live through you since we can’t get away with the same shit you do,” Easton explains. “Your dad gives you more room than ours.”

“Which is totally fucking backward when you think about what he does for a living.” Preston starts floating on his back, slowly paddling his way down the length of the pool.

“After all the work it took to clean up from the last party, I’m not trying to go through that again so soon.” I’m tired of talking about this. It’s easy for the people who wouldn’t end up with no car for a week or two if they got caught to complain. He’s not really complaining, though. He’s bored. Easton is bored. I’m bored. Which is why we’re hanging out at the pool on a Monday afternoon, bullshitting and sharing a 12-pack of beer.

For some reason, nothing is satisfying me today. I spent the morning trying to settle on something to do, something to pass the time since today was a holiday and classes were canceled. I'm restless and not in the best mood. Why I thought having friends over would be a good idea, I don't remember. I'm not good company.

And I know exactly why.

Why can't I stop thinking about her for just one damn day? I haven't even seen her, and I'm not complaining. Every time I think about her running away from me yesterday, bitter heat swells in me, and I want nothing more than to break down her door and drag her out of that room by her hair. Why can't she let me be nice to her? That's all I was trying to do. She threw it in my face.

"You should at least invite some girls over," Easton suggests while his brother nods hard. "Things don't have to get crazy, but it would be fun to hang out, maybe order some pizza or whatever. It's a holiday. We should be celebrating."

"Who do you have in mind?" Do I want to do that? I want nothing less than to play host today. Having a couple of friends over is one thing, but expanding the guest list? Still, I feel like I have to play along. Maybe it would help my mood in the end.

"Definitely not Tiana and her crew." Preston rolls his eyes once he finishes his lazy backstroke and pushes himself up until he's perched on the edge of the pool with his legs dangling. "She's not worth the energy. I heard what they did to your sister's bathroom."

I don't know what bothers me more: remembering the mess she made or hearing Elliana referred to as my sister. "Stepsister," I mutter before I wave a hand. "Yeah, I warned her not to pull that shit again. She's not invited over here anymore."

"I don't know, though." Easton strokes his chin, smirking. "She does have some hot friends."

"Not worth it," I mutter, narrowing my eyes as I think back on how surprised she had the nerve to seem when I challenged her. "So get rid of that idea. We know plenty of hot girls."

"All I know is, I wouldn't mind seeing some tits today." Easton even sighs like it's some mystical goal.

"What, you forget porn exists?" I ask with a smirk.

Preston blurts out a laugh. “Him? It would be like asking if he forgot oxygen exists.”

“I don’t need porn. I can get pussy whenever I want.”

I’m getting tired of this conversation. “Anyway, I’m still recovering from the fucking wedding. It’s a shame you guys weren’t there. There were a ton of girls around. Daughters of the women Irene wants to be friends with.” It’s immature, but I can’t help gagging when I say her name.

“And I bet all those old ladies wanted you to hook up with their daughters,” Preston teases with a laugh. “God, weddings are the best for getting laid. It’s a shame you couldn’t score invites for us.”

“I know Dad would’ve liked it if some of my friends could’ve made it—anything to get me in a better mood about the day. But he already had to shell out a fortune to get all of Irene’s guest list in there.” Not like she knew a lot of the people. The whole thing is still too sad and pathetic.

Easton sits up a little straighter and cranes his neck, and I’m about to ask what called his attention when I notice movement out of the corner of my eye. Inside the kitchen, just on the other side of the floor to ceiling bay windows.

There goes that hot, bitter sensation. She’s using the blender, making a smoothie. Instead of a sweater today, she’s wearing a sweatshirt, and it’s big enough that it hangs halfway down her thighs. The rest of her legs are covered in jeans, and her hair hangs down around her face as usual, but she can’t hide the way she peers out from behind those limp locks from the corner of her eye.

Oh, the sneaky little bitch. Probably figured she could get away with coming down to the kitchen since I’m out here with the guys. Hiding, as always, shoulders up around her ears.

And she’s the one who walked off on me yesterday. What does that say about me? My jaw is aching from all the teeth grinding I’m doing.

“Tell me she wore something better than that for the wedding,” Easton groans.

“I NOTICED HER AT YOUR PARTY,” Preston muses. Like his brother, he’s staring into the kitchen. Neither of them bother hiding their interest. I’m sure it’s making her skin crawl. “She’s got a great body under all that shit she wears.”

“Don’t say that.” Fuck me. Where did that come from? The two of them look at me with their mouths hanging open, telling me they’re just as surprised as I am. “She’s fucking gross. I thought you had better taste than that.”

“We have different definitions of gross if she’s yours,” Preston tells me with a laugh. “She’s got a great ass. Nice legs, too—a shame she always hides them.”

Am I in hell? What did I do to deserve this? “You both need medication or something if that’s your idea of remotely fuckable.” And now I don’t even want to swim anymore. There’s no reason for me to feel this uncomfortable. Nothing that makes any sense, anyway. I only know I don’t want to be around these two anymore.

I’m trying to come up with an excuse to get rid of them as I push myself up out of the pool, but there’s really nothing I can say that they won’t question. So instead, I settle on telling the truth. “I’m not really feeling this. I don’t feel great in general.”

“You don’t seem like you feel right.” There’s no judgment from Preston, or from Easton, when he grunts in agreement. “It’s cool. Go jerk off or something. It’ll make you feel more relaxed.”

“Not everything is about that.” Though right now, it seems like this is about that—at least a little. There’s this unreal tension tearing at me. I don’t know what to do about it, what to do about her. Can I have a single day when I don’t have to talk about her or acknowledge she exists?

Not like it matters, since she’s always on my mind. Especially today. I should’ve known better than to try to be nice to her. Who the hell does she think she is, acting like she’s better than me?

Instead of going to the house, the guys walk around the outside to reach the car they left in the driveway. I can hear the engine as they pull out of the drive while I open the sliding glass door leading into the kitchen.

“I’m just cleaning up after myself. I’m not trying to get in the way or anything.” She won’t look at me as she washes out the blender.

“You already did.”

She slows down until the sponge is barely moving inside the glass carafe. “What are you saying? I didn’t do anything.”

“Right. Keep telling yourself that.”

For some reason, she has this idea now that she can show me her temper whenever she feels like it. Her hands slap the counter before she spins

around, eyes narrowed behind those ugly glasses. “Do me a favor, please. Stop blaming me for everything that goes wrong in your life. It’s starting to get boring.”

“The only thing that went wrong in my life today is the way you paraded yourself around in front of the window to get Preston and Easton’s attention.”

“What?” She blurts out a laugh before covering her mouth with her hand, and the gesture only pisses me off worse than ever. Who the fuck is she laughing at—me? “Is that really what you think I was doing? You need help, seriously.”

She has forgotten who is in charge around here, and that’s on me. I’ve made life too easy for her lately. I’ve been too nice, trying to relate to her for some stupid reason. She’s not worth the effort.

She barely has time for her eyes to widen before I’m on her, pinning her against the counter and leaning in until she has to bend backward. That arrogant gleam in her eye is extinguished like a candle flame in a sudden breeze. She’s pretty tough when she thinks she can get away with shit, isn’t she? Call her bluff, and she’s a trembling, whimpering little nothing. The way I’ve always known she is.

But even now, she can’t let go of this fake defiance. “Tell me exactly how I was showing myself off when I’m wearing a sweatshirt that covers half my body.” It doesn’t matter that her chin trembles when she lifts it. She lifts it in the first place, which is enough of a problem. I have let things go too far. “Tell me. What was I doing wrong? I wouldn’t want to do it again.”

“Keep it up,” I warn, leaning in close enough that I can see her pulse fluttering in her neck. “See how far it gets you?”

This isn’t enough. Having her this close, watching fear darken her brown eyes until they’re almost black. All it does is make me want more of her fear. I need her trembling. I crave the satisfaction of her submission once she understands she can’t fight me.

“You know what?” Reaching down, I take hold of my dick through my swim shorts. I’m thickening, twitching a little more with every flutter in her throat. “I’m feeling a little stressed. I need you to help me relax.”

Her face was flushed, but now the color drains from it, which only adds fuel to the fire. “You know what always relaxes me?” Taking a step back, I look down at myself—stiffer by the second, looking for something warm and wet. “And you did so good the last time. Get on your knees.”

"I don't want to," she whispers, folding her arms and trembling.

"Remind me when I asked whether you want to or not. Get on your fucking knees, or everybody is gonna have a lot to say about your photo shoot when we go back to school tomorrow."

"You're disgusting," she spits out, teeth bared. "What was that all about yesterday, trying to be friends? Why do that if you're going to treat me this way today?"

You ruined it first. I almost have to bite off my tongue to keep from throwing that in her face. She can't know how she offended me. I can't act like some whiny little bitch.

She hisses in what sounds like pain when I use my free hand to take her by the back of the neck and force her down until she gets on her knees with a grunt. "That's right. Show me your attitude," I mutter, reaching into my shorts to pull my dick free. "Give me more of a reason to fuck your face."

The thought of that brings me the closest thing to peace I have felt in days, and it's what makes me run my swollen head over her mouth once I'm out of my shorts. She can try all she wants to turn away, but it's no use.

All it takes is a little extra pressure on her neck to remind her how pointless it is to fight. She finally opens her mouth and as soon as her lips are parted, I shove my way inside.

I don't know what's better: the warmth all around me or her miserable groan when I hit the back of her throat. Maybe it's a blend of both. My eyes close slowly as I adjust to the sensation, buried deep. "Fuck, that's good," I whisper, and her disgusted grunt makes me smile to myself before I pull back a few inches, then drive myself forward again with no warning. She finds my thighs with both hands and slaps at them, but that's easy to ignore, especially when it feels so damn good to use her.

"I'm glad I found something you're good for," I mutter before hunger takes over. I'm not interested in taking it slow, drawing out the experience. Fuck that.

Her choked whimper is music to my ears. I want more of it. That's what makes me take her head in my hands and hold it still so I can pummel her with deep, hard strokes that make her gag and groan pitifully. When I look down and find her face going red, eyes watering, it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. Her misery is exquisite. And I want more. So much more.

“This is what you were looking for?” My hips move fast, invading her again and again, and now her fingers curl into claws, which she drags over my legs like that’s going to do anything to stop me. If her high-pitched whimpers don’t do it, why would a few scratches?

“Take it,” I grunt between ragged breaths. “This is what you wanted. Walking around here. Making sure you’re noticed. This is what you get.”

I drive deep, staying buried, with her nose pressed against the base of my cock. Now she’s shrieking with her mouth full, almost slicing me open with those nails, but I savor the feeling of being completely wrapped in heat and in charge of whether she breathes or passes out.

Finally, I take mercy, pulling my hips back, letting her breathe through her nose again. “I’m not finished,” I mutter when her body starts to relax. Is it saliva that’s dripping onto my balls or is it her tears? Both, I hope. Nobody rejects me when I’m trying to be nice. I won’t make that mistake again.

And then she does it. She looks up at me; her glasses crooked, her eyes swimming with tears, and the sight takes the tension that was already building and makes it explode all at once.

“Here it comes!” I manage to gasp before slamming deep again and filling her throat while she gags on me. “Swallow it. Swallow every fucking drop or you’ll lick it off the floor,” I warn, while waves of bliss roll through me. The satisfaction is unreal, so intense it makes my knees shake.

When I’m finished, balls drained, I pull out with a regretful sigh. “I’m sorry that’s over,” I tell her as I back away so I can gaze down at her tearful face, still red. Her chin is coated with spit, eyes watery.

She gets up right away and turns toward the sink, taking off her glasses to rinse her face and her mouth. “So is that it?” she asks after spitting out a mouthful of water.

“Is what it?” Still, there’s defiance in her voice. What do I have to do to break that defiance?

She turns her head, meeting my gaze, her reddened eyes narrowed. “Is that the price of living in this house while our parents are gone?”

“You know what? I like the sound of that.” I wait just long enough to watch her face fall when she realizes she gave me an idea, then leave the kitchen, whistling softly. I started this day in a shit mood, but suddenly, things have improved.

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EIGHTEEN

Elliana

IF ANYTHING, having to go to school means knowing I won't have to risk running into Carter out of nowhere the way I could easily do at home. Like yesterday.

The memory is still brutally fresh and sitting at the front of my mind on the way to school this morning. Carter hasn't said a word as he drives—if anything, I'm sort of surprised he's driving me at all. I figured he would leave without me, knowing no one could stop him. He wouldn't be getting any phone calls from Paul, and it's not like I can ask him to come back from Thailand to drive me the way I did the first time.

All I can do is sit with my backpack on my lap, arms wrapped around it, like it could possibly protect me. Especially once Carter is determined to do something.

Like choking me with his dick. Like fucking my face. It didn't matter that I was struggling and ready to black out because I couldn't breathe. It didn't matter that I was crying and gagging. It was almost like that only made things worse.

My gaze drifts to the world passing on the other side of the passenger window. I can't help but wonder as we roll by so many people of all ages whether any of them carry around the same shameful secrets I do. How many of them are struggling, too?

He doesn't even bother saying anything before he gets out of the truck and slams the door. It's times like this I can't help but worry he's going to send those pictures around the way he's been threatening. I don't want to believe he would, but can I really afford to put it past him? I just don't know, and that's maybe the worst part of all—the not knowing. Always waiting for the worst.

We don't have a class together on Tuesdays, thank god. It's bad enough having to ignore the faint snickers and whispers I still hear as I walk across campus. It's not as bad as it was before. Maybe they're getting tired of me, ready to move on to someone else. But I still hear it.

Though sometimes, even though it makes me feel ungrateful, I would rather push through and ignore the bullying than face kindness. I'm used to bullying. Kindness? I'm still not sure how to act.

Which is why I feel myself closing off when a familiar duo catches sight of me as I pass the library. "Hey! Elliana!" Wren chirps like the bird she's named after. "How was the wedding?"

"Meet us at the cafeteria after class!" Maya calls out. "We want to hear all about it!"

Well, at least this way I can prepare myself for the hangout. That's easier than being bombarded and descended on all at once. I hate that I even think about it that way, but the girls are just as overwhelming sometimes as they are sweet and friendly.

I wave with a smile before continuing on my way, prepared to tell them all about how cringe the day was. It was embarrassing—especially once Mom set the champagne aside and started drinking the hard stuff—but I would rather think about that than the humiliation in the kitchen yesterday. I still don't understand what set him off in the first place, which is kind of terrifying. How can I avoid situations like that when I don't know what started it?

That question is still on my mind by the time I head for the cafeteria. It only hits me once I'm through the glass doors that the girls didn't say whether it would only be the three of us or not. Are their boyfriends going to be hanging out with us?

In other words, will Carter be there, since he's glued to their sides?

It's too late to back out now. The girls are sitting at the usual table—there must be some invisible reserve sign on it that keeps other people from sitting there—and they must have been looking out for me, because now

they're both smiling and waving me over. This is the kind of thing normal people do all the time. They have lunch with friends and talk about what happened over the weekend. As much as I wish most of the time that the rest of the world would leave me alone, I can't pretend there isn't a part of me that wants to live the way other people do. I can't afford to pass up opportunities like this, where people seek me out and ask me to be their friend.

And I can't, for any reason, allow Carter to dictate what I do. It would be one thing to turn the girls down because I'm overwhelmed or feeling shy. But to consider turning on my heel and bolting because there's a chance I might see him? I can't give him that power.

He already has too much as it is.

"So we want all the details." Wren bounces up and down in her seat as I plop down across from her. "Did you take pictures? How did you look?"

"I didn't really think to take any pictures—but we got a million of them from the photographer. As soon as we get the proofs back, I'll show them to you."

"Were there any tragic drunken speeches? That's one of my favorite parts," Maya teases, making Wren laugh.

"Actually, I left before everyone got too drunk." And I really, truly wish the memory didn't make me feel so warm all of a sudden. He was more human on Saturday night. He acted like a regular, almost decent person.

Everything changed the night before that, too. When we had sex. And then it was nice again on Sunday. It's like being on a roller coaster all the time. Stupid me, not carrying my motion sickness pills around.

Thinking about him means I can't pay full attention to the girls as they talk about what they did this weekend. Not that I really need to pay close attention since I know whatever it was, it revolved around their guys. It's not that I'm jealous or anything like that. It's just that I can't relate. Even though they both go out of their way to make me feel included, there are times like this when I can't share much of myself. I really wish that wasn't so. All I can do is sit back and listen to their stories and laugh when it seems like that's what I should do.

"There's the most beautiful girl I know." I'm just as surprised as Wren when Briggs comes up out of nowhere and wraps his arms around her from behind.

Tucker does the same thing with Maya, nuzzling her neck while she squeals and giggles. “Too hungry to wait for us?” he asks before dropping into a chair next to hers.

How naïve can I be, thinking it would just be the three of us? But my heart doesn’t really drop until Carter sits practically at the other end of the table from where I am. Not that I would ever complain that he’s keeping his distance.

Oh, who am I kidding? I was actually starting to think he wasn’t so bad for roughly three seconds there—feeling strangely touched that he would go out of his way to be kind. Just because he’s acting the way he is now doesn’t erase the feelings that were starting to bloom in me, no matter how much I pretend otherwise.

I can hardly bring myself to glance his way. What has to happen to a person to inspire the kind of chaos that boils in him all the time? Why am I even asking myself that question? He is an enigma, and I don’t have the time or the energy to solve him.

“Elliana.” One of the twins—I still can’t tell the difference between Preston and Easton—grins my way as he unwraps a sandwich. “It was a shame you didn’t come swimming with us yesterday.”

I’m looking at him, but I can see Carter from the corner of my eye. That means I notice when Carter’s spine stiffens, and he sits up straighter, scowling down at his lunch like it insulted him. I wonder what his friends would think of him if I told them what he did to me after they left.

I wouldn’t have the nerve to tell them. I would be too humiliated. That doesn’t mean I can let the opportunity to score a point pass by. “Maybe next time,” I offer with a grin I don’t feel.

It doesn’t matter if I mean it or not. It makes Carter shoot me a dirty look nobody else notices. His blue eyes look black as they burn holes into me. I don’t care. He can choke on whatever it is that’s making him act this way—probably jealousy that he’s not the center of attention, the way he so clearly has to be at all times.

“Elliana was telling us about the wedding,” Wren explains to Carter, sounding playful and giggly. “I bet you had an amazing time, with half the married women in town clawing at each other to dance with you.”

“Not half. Maybe a third.” He is so good at pretending to be better than he is, nicer than he is. It’s a costume he puts on and takes off at will.

And when everybody else is busy chatting or eating, he lets that persona slip away long enough to narrow his eyes at me. Does it really bother him so much to know one of his friends is willing to acknowledge me? Can he be that immature?

What am I saying? Of course he is.

I feel safer and more secure when everyone's around us, which means my knees are shaking by the time everybody starts getting up and gathering their trash. "I'll text you later," Wren promises before leaving with Briggs, hand-in-hand. Maya gives me a little wave before she and Tucker head off, while the twins and Kellan wander over to another table to talk to a handful of girls.

Which leaves me with the one person I wanted to avoid until it's time to go home later.

And he's just as pissed as he seemed to be—only now, he doesn't have to hide it since his friends are gone. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he hisses, following me to the trash can where I empty my tray.

All my silence does is make things worse. He takes me by the arm and pulls me aside, crowding close to me with his back to the rest of the room. "What was that all about? Flirting with my friends? Can't you get enough attention?"

It doesn't matter what I do—he's going to find a way to twist it around to fit his own narrative.

"I was just talking. That's it." All right, maybe I was trying to get under his skin. Clearly, I was successful. But still.

"If you want to catch their attention that much, I can make it easy for you." Those strangely black eyes of his glitter as he looks down at me. "I'll send them your pictures. That will earn you plenty of attention."

I've never hated anyone the way I hate him now. All of the humiliation I ever went through, the misery I've experienced at the hands of other people—it's nothing compared to what flows through me while I stare up at him. I can almost taste him in my mouth and can definitely remember the terror of thinking he would never let me up for air.

I would swear I can actually hear something break in me. Maybe it's my sanity. Maybe it's whatever little bit of self-preservation I was still holding onto. I don't know. All I know for sure is I am sick and tired of putting up with this. When will enough be enough?

“You know what?” I shrug, and the surprise on his face is priceless. “I don’t care. Send them out. Send them to everybody you know for all I care. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You’re full of shit,” he scoffs, looking me up and down. “All talk.”

“Whatever makes you feel better. Why don’t you send them to everybody—see if I’m bluffing or not?”

He’s wary now, like an animal testing its surroundings. One eyebrow slowly arches and his nostrils flare. “Yeah, right. Everything you’ve done so far to get me not to send them, and now you’re going to turn around and dare me to do it?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand, so let me spell it out for you.” I’m shaking—I’m wishing I’d never opened my mouth in the first place, but I can’t stop now. Besides, it feels good to tell him off. “I’ve already been through eight different kinds of hell. Getting bullied by you, by people at this school, and before then. You know about it. So anything that happens to me after people see those photos is nothing new.”

Pausing for a second gives me the chance to watch as he tries to put this together. I guess it’s not easy coming to the understanding that you’ve been wasting your time—especially when you’ve spent your whole life thinking your shit doesn’t stink and the moon and stars hang because you want them there. “So go ahead. I’m tired of letting you do whatever you want out of fear. Be my guest. Show the pictures around.”

He’s too surprised to stop me from slipping past him. Somehow, I manage to walk a straight line even though my entire body is shaking. What is wrong with me? Have I really lost it? Why not stick my hand in a tank full of piranhas while I’m at it?

As I walk out of the cafeteria on shaking legs, I can’t decide whether I’ve helped myself by standing up to him... or made things so much worse.

NINETEEN

Carter

KELLAN JERKS his chin at me when he answers my knock at his front door. “Hey.” Coming from him, that’s a mouthful. His broad frame almost fills the doorway, but I hear laughter coming from behind him.

“Hey.” Holding up the six-pack of beer I brought along with me, I crane my neck to look over his shoulder. I’m not the first one here—there’s a handful of people hanging out, spread out around his living room. Somebody thought it would be fun to turn on porn, and I hear guys giving play-by-play and predicting what will happen next while the girls groan and gag.

He steps aside to let me in, now letting me see pizza boxes stacked on the coffee table. This is what I need right now. An excuse to kick back, something simple like pizza and beer. Nothing I have to put any effort into when I’m feeling on edge, like a tiny push would make me lose my grip.

All because of her. She’s not even worth it. Not even the kind of person worth going out of my way for or being nice to. So why is she still sitting in the front of my mind hours after she smarted off at me in the cafeteria?

Fuck it, I should not be thinking about this now. I’m supposed to be here to get her off my mind. That’s the whole point. Forgetting my pain-in-the-ass stepsister for a little while, bullshitting with people who actually deserve my time.

“There he is.” Briggs spots me and waves me over. “I’m glad you decided to show. Tucker is out with Maya, and the last time I saw Preston and Easton, they were trying to convince Hunter McCall to let them do an Eiffel Tower with her. Like it’s their biggest dream or something.”

“It probably is,” I decide with a laugh, cracking open a can of beer and gulping it like it’s the first thing I’ve had to drink in forever. It goes down cold and smooth, but it doesn’t do much to cool the resentment burning in my chest. Like a hot coal got lodged under my ribs. It’s burning me up inside, making it impossible to think about anything but how much I want to make her regret thinking she can stand up to me.

“So what’s up with you lately?”

So much for forgetting my problems for a little while. The beer tastes sour now, and something tells me I’m not going to enjoy this night the way I thought I would. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that shit.” He hits me with the sort of look only an old friend can wear. “I know you too well. You’re walking around like somebody took a shit in your shoes—not just once, but all the time.”

“You found me out.” Leaning back in my armchair, I offer him a shrug. “Somebody has been breaking into the house and shitting in my shoes every day.”

He smirks, but there’s nothing humorous in his hard gaze. “Seriously. This can’t all be about your dad getting married, right?”

I love how he gets to decide what is and isn’t worth me caring about. My hand tightens around the can—I have to loosen my grip when the aluminum starts to crumple. “Everything’s fine. I really don’t want to talk about it tonight. I was kind of hoping to get away from it.”

“So things are bad?” His brows draw together, and I kind of hate him for looking worried.

“It’s not like that. I just... wanted to clear my head.”

“Okay. If you say so.”

Fuck, there is nothing more annoying than somebody who says that. I can only bite my tongue, because otherwise, I might say something that would lead to a fight I don’t want to have. Only because I don’t have the mental energy for it. Briggs is one of my best friends and has been for years. I won’t let Elliana fuck that up.

A bunch of high-pitched giggling catches my attention, and I turn my head in time to see Tiana stroll in from the backyard with her girls. “Oh,

fuck,” I mutter, rolling my eyes at Briggs. “You could pay her to take a hint, and she still wouldn’t.”

“I think she gets off on it,” he mutters darkly. Tiana made Wren’s life hell for a while. It’s like her vocation or something. “Some people would rather get a root canal with no novocaine than show up someplace where half the people there have told them to go fuck off at least once. She wants everybody to know she doesn’t care, which means she does care, of course.”

The bitch needs to get a clue and maybe some self-respect while she’s at it. “All I’m saying is, I’m gonna need a lot more of this if I’m going to sit here and act like I wouldn’t sell tickets to watch her get her ass beat.” I hold up my can before draining it.

It’s Kellan who overhears me, clapping a hand on my shoulder when he comes up from behind me. “You want to unplug?” He holds up what looks like a small bong. “Have some of this. Let yourself melt into the chair. Nothing will bother you.”

“You’ve graduated to bubblers now?” Briggs asks, nodding toward the device in Kellan’s hand.

“It’s a smoother hit than a joint or a bowl,” Kellan explains as he hands me the bubbler.

Why the hell not? Whatever it takes to get rid of all this pressure that won’t let me go. She won’t let me go.

Yeah, I definitely need some of this.

He’s right, too. It’s a much smoother hit than I’m used to. Then again, I don’t smoke as much as some of my friends do. Not that I have a problem with it. But there are certain lines Dad has forbidden me to cross. He knows I drink and figures it’s going to happen whether or not he likes it, but he still has pretty old-fashioned ideas about weed, and he loves to tell stories of accidents he has seen the aftermath of. *“Everybody thinks they’re fine to drive while they’re high,”* he likes to remind me. *“They know drunk driving is stupid and dangerous, but they figure a little weed is no problem. Tell that to the guys who have to cut them out of their car after they wrap it around a light pole.”* So I don’t keep it around the house and only smoke when I’m at a party where it’s available.

Which means it only takes a few hits before I start to feel it. “Shit, this is potent.” Does that stop me from going in for more? No fucking way, because for the first time in a long time, the problems that were hanging

over me when I got here don't seem like such a big deal. Everything that was weighing on me sort of melts away. I feel lighter than I have in a long time.

"Look at you." An unwelcome voice rings out in my ear before they sit on the arm of the chair so she can grin down at me. She's wearing a skimpy tank top and shorts that show everything but her pussy. "I didn't know you liked to smoke that much."

"Yeah, I guess there's a lot of things about me you don't know, Tiana." And she never will. When she leans in way too close until she's almost sitting on top of me, I have to shrug her off. "What is it with you? Let a guy breathe."

"I'm just trying to be friendly. I know you were mad at me before, and I wanted to make it up to you."

"I never asked you to make it up to me. And you don't have to," I insist. "We're fine, okay?"

We're not, but I'll say just about anything to get her off me. She is nothing but a nasty, scheming little cunt.

And that's why the touch of her fingers on my forearm makes me flinch. "Go away," I bark. All around us, conversation goes quiet. Not silent, but definitely not as loud as before.

"Go on," Briggs tells her, jerking a thumb. "Stop being a pain in the ass for once."

Her eyes narrow dangerously before she gets up without saying a word. Just having her away from me has me blowing out a sigh of relief. "She's like shit on my shoe," I mutter, leaning over to grab a piece of pizza. "It doesn't matter how I try to scrub her off."

But now that she's gone to bother somebody else, I can relax into my high again. Nothing is that serious. Everything's under control. After I finish my slice—which might be some of the best pizza I've ever eaten in my entire life—I rest my head against the back of the chair, lost in the over-the-top scene playing out on the TV.

Wishing it wouldn't make me think of Elliana. What's she doing right now? Probably glad I'm out of the house, the way I'm glad to be away from her for now. But it's only for now. I still have to see her when I go home, unless she finds a way to hide out.

I'm still thinking about her when my eyes drift shut once it's too much effort to keep them open.

“You’re fucking kidding me!”

It’s that shout and the laughter that follows it, which shakes me out of a deep sleep. Fuck, how long was I out for? My head is packed with cotton, and my eyes are dry. I’ve never had cottonmouth this bad, either. The shit Kellan gave me was strong enough to knock me out.

“She’s got great tits,” somebody says, which makes me look at the TV. Somebody switched off the porn while I was asleep—now it’s an action movie where things are exploding and shrapnel is flying. What tits are they talking about?

“It’s always the quiet ones,” somebody else decides, laughing. “The way she always walks around, all covered up, you would never know she’s got that body underneath.”

“I wonder if she thought about starting an OnlyFans page.”

“Shit, I might actually pay for that. But don’t tell anybody.”

I’m still foggy, slow, but I think I’m starting to understand, at least a little. It sounds like they’re talking about Elliana, but why would they be? Who else do I know who always walks around covered up, though? They must be talking about her.

“Oh, there he is.” One of the guys from the football team jerks his chin at me when he notices me looking around. “You’ll have to thank your stepsister for giving me something to beat off to tonight. Don’t tell me you haven’t already done it.” He laughs, making the guys around him laugh, too.

“What the hell are you talking about?” And that’s when I finally see his phone in his hand. Everybody’s holding their phones, laughing, talking about what’s on their screens.

My hand is trembling when I reach over to grab my phone. This is impossible. I’m dreaming this, right? There’s no fucking way.

But there is. I don’t want to believe what I see, but I can’t deny it as I scroll through the texts that came in while I was basically unconscious. All of them are replies to the text I sent, only I didn’t send it. I couldn’t have.

I wouldn’t have actually sent out those photos of Elliana to everybody. I threatened it. I seriously thought about it, but I wouldn’t have done it. And considering I wasn’t awake, I definitely didn’t. But somebody did.

“Where is Briggs?” I bark, standing up, looking around.

“He left a little while ago,” somebody calls out. “I didn’t know you were such a great photographer!”

“Get fucked,” I snarl. Again, I look down at my phone, wishing somebody would tell me this is a joke. A text from Maya tells me it definitely isn’t. *You are dead for this. How could you?* I want to tell her it wasn’t me, but who was it?

“Who did this? Who fucking sent these pictures out?” I could kill somebody. I’ve never been so close to committing violence in my life. I only thought I was before now. All these smirking, laughing assholes—totally clueless, not giving a shit about anybody but themselves and the next thing that will distract them from life for a little while.

“Tiana!” One of the guys calls out, almost singing her name. “Somebody wants to talk to you!”

I should have fucking known the second I saw the text. Who else would do something that wretched? I don’t know how she got away with it without somebody stopping her—Briggs left, Kellan was busy hosting everybody. If anyone else noticed, they probably figured it was all a joke anyway and didn’t bother trying to stop her.

“Where the fuck is she?” I’m as close to murder as I can be without actually ending her miserable life as I march through the house, knowing she’s not smart enough to leave after pulling some shit like this.

When I find her in the kitchen, I don’t stop marching until I have her backed against the glass doors leading outside. “You are lucky I don’t put you through this fucking door,” I growl, leaning in. Something in my face makes her eyes bulge and her mouth fall open. “How dare you? You went into my phone. You sent those fucking pictures out to everybody? What is wrong with you?”

“Maybe you need to ask yourself that question,” she sneers, but her voice is shaking. She’s only pretending she isn’t scared. She should be scared.

“Stay away from me, and I mean forever,” I whisper. “Don’t ever speak to me again. Don’t come near me. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t exist—and believe me,” I add, “you want it that way. Because otherwise?”

Slamming my fist against the door, close to her head, seems to get the point across. She looks horrified, stricken, and she deserves to. She deserves much worse.

But right now, there’s someone else on my mind, someone much more important. Someone I rush home to while trying like hell to get her on the phone. “It’s me again,” I announce when I get Elliana’s voicemail for the

third time. “Just answer the phone, okay? Or call me back, something. I’ll be home soon. We need to talk.”

Am I naïve to think there’s a chance she doesn’t know yet? Who am I kidding? If Maya saw the photos, I have no doubt she called Elliana right away to make sure she was all right. When I think of her being all alone in her room, the way she usually is, trying to deal with all the feelings this must bring up in her... I slam the heel of my hand against the wheel, cursing myself for taking those pictures and for keeping them in my phone to begin with.

She won’t care that I’m sorry, not that I blame her, but I have to try to get the message across. I’m out of the truck almost before I have the chance to put it in park, running up the front steps of my house with my heart pounding and blood rushing in my ears.

“Elliana?” I call out once I’m inside. The house is silent, the lights off except for in the kitchen. I run in there to look around—there’s a half-eaten sandwich on the counter, telling me she was having dinner when the world fell apart. Because of me, at the end of the day. Tiana sent those pictures out, but I’m the reason they existed.

My feet pound the floor, then the stairs, Elliana’s voice ringing out in my memory. Telling me about how she was bullied. How she could have died the night they threw her in the pool. All that defiance she hit me with in the cafeteria, reminding me she had already been through so much and that I couldn’t do any worse.

There is no way she won’t take this as my response.

The sound of her heartbroken sobs crushes me, but comforts me at the same time. She’s alive in her room, at least, with the door locked against me. I mean, everyone’s got to have a breaking point. She’s strong, but she’s not invincible.

Knowing she’s alive, if devastated, is still better than the alternative. “Elliana, I didn’t send those pictures out. It was Tiana. You’ve got to believe me. I fell asleep at Kellan’s after I told her off, and she was pissed, so she went into my phone to fuck with me.”

No response. “You know that’s the kind of thing she would do, right? I’m not making this up. Other people saw her do it. It wasn’t me.”

Fuck. Even though I’m telling the truth, I hear how hollow it sounds. *I didn’t do it. It wasn’t me. It was all her fault.* Sure, it is Tiana’s fault, but I am not blameless. The girl on the other side of the door knows it, too. No

amount of truth will ease her agony, because it can't unsend those pictures. It can't erase the memory of every person who has looked at them since they went out.

Touching my forehead to the wood, I plead, "Open the door. At least let me see you. Let me apologize face-to-face. We'll figure out a way through this, but I need you to open the door."

I'm talking to myself. All she does is cry a little louder than before. Because of me. I wanted to ruin her, didn't I? I wanted to make her suffer the way I only thought she made me suffer.

I didn't understand real suffering until just now, sliding to the floor with my back to her door. Wanting more than anything to make it up to her, knowing I can't. My punishment is listening to her cry and knowing there's not a damn thing I can do to make it stop, because I'm the one who made it happen in the first place.

"I'm not going anywhere," I call out. Does she hear me over her sobs? I don't know, but I have to try. "And I can wait forever if I have to. You have to talk to me, eventually."

But when I put myself in her shoes, I know damn well I would rather starve to death than face the person who destroyed me. I only hope she doesn't decide to take it that far.

TWENTY

Elliana

“ALL YOU HAVE to do is open the door, and you can eat. I know you’re hungry by now.”

I hate him. I hate him so much. Even more now than I ever did before. And not only because of the pictures, though that would be enough of a reason for me to dance on his grave.

“There’s a big, thick turkey sandwich out here for you.” Saliva floods my mouth at the sound of his voice, telling me all about the food he brought up for me. “And there’s chips, too, and a couple of chocolate chip cookies. You might want to grab those now before I eat them, because they’re really good. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to go without taking them for myself.”

He can’t leave me alone. Like it’s his purpose in life to find new ways to torture me. Of course I’m starving—I haven’t eaten since last night, at least until that text came in and ruined what was left of my self-esteem, which wasn’t all that much in the first place.

My empty stomach twists in a knot, and I curl into a tight ball, buried under blankets, closing my eyes and wishing he would go away. Forever, preferably.

Once again, the last voice I want to hear now or ever floats in under the door. “You know I’m not going away, right?”

Resentment takes the place of hunger and makes my stomach clench harder than before. Oh, I believe him. He has sat out there pretty much the whole day, giving me the play-by-play of making himself comfortable, watching videos and TV shows on his tablet, commenting on what he's watching. Asking me over and over when I'm coming out. Telling me to give him a sign that I'm still alive. I finally threw my hairbrush at the door so he would know I'm in here, alive and breathing. He hasn't broken me. I still hate him.

He can't stay out there forever, no matter what he says or threatens or whatever it is he thinks he's doing. He will eventually have to go to school. The jerk skipped class today, because why give me the chance to leave my room? But he has to go back sooner or later. Until then, I can drink from the bathroom sink. I am not going to die in here.

But I very much feel like I would die if I had to look at him.

It's almost eight o'clock when he starts his shit again. "I am not leaving this door until you open it," he calls out. "I'll sleep out here again tonight. Why are you making this so much harder than it has to be? I know you're hungry. At least eat something."

Why, so he can feel better about himself? I know that's what this is really about. Easing his guilt, which I know he must feel based on what he sounded like when he first got home last night. He deserves it, too. I wish the guilt would kill him. He has violated me in pretty much every way imaginable. There is nothing he could face that would balance the scales at this point.

"For fuck's sake." There's a lot of movement out there before he pounds on the door. "I'm sick of this. I've been trying to be nice and give you space, but it's time to open the door and face reality. You need to eat."

So he can feel better? No, thanks.

"I'm going to kick the fucking door in. I'm counting to three."

My heart lurches, and I clutch the blankets tighter, like they can do anything to protect me. He can't mean it. He's bluffing. Paul would have a fit if he came home and my bedroom door was broken.

"I'm serious. Here we go." Carter's voice echoes out in the hall. "One... I mean it, Elliana... Two..."

He doesn't bother saying three. He only kicks the door, which flies open hard enough to rebound off the wall and almost slam shut again.

A scream tears its way out of me before I know what's happening, and now he isn't Carter. Now he's one of Mom's boyfriends, the nameless men who wandered in and out of our lives over the years. Men whose faces are now a blur, so many years later, but I don't need to remember their faces to remember the things they did. The screaming, the breaking glass, the threats.

The nights Mom crawled into my bed, squeezing me tight like I could do anything to protect her, while the latest loser in her life tore our home apart. My door got kicked in then, too.

God, I haven't thought about any of that in so long. It's always there, in my memory, but it's not something I want to focus on. But now it comes back in full color, full detail, and I scream again. "Get out! Get out, get out!"

I can't breathe. The sound of my breathless gasps fills the room. Am I having a heart attack? My chest—it's excruciating, the pressure, the pain.

"For fuck's sake!" Carter barks. "I'm not doing anything to you, but making sure you take care of yourself."

I barely hear him. He needs to go. I can't breathe. *Let's see if she can float! I thought shit always floats on the surface!*

"Hey!" He crosses the room in a few long strides while I scramble away from him, curling up against the headboard with a pillow clutched in front of me. I'm going to faint. My head is spinning.

And he sees it. I know he sees it because he looks horrified. "Breathe. You're safe. Nobody is hurting you."

Easy for him to say.

"Take a breath." His voice is gentler when he sits on the edge of the bed, leaving space between us. "Just breathe, okay? That's all you have to worry about right now. Take a breath. Nobody is hurting you right now. You'll be okay."

Tears trail down my cheek, and I brush them away, frustrated. Why do I have to cry? Like he needs to think I'm any weaker than I already am. Just one more thing to use against me.

Slowly, the tightness in my throat loosens, and the pressure in my chest eases until I can pull in a decent breath without struggling. "There you go. Just take it easy. You're all right."

"Oh, am I?" Now that I'm breathing again, all I have to worry about is keeping myself from clawing his eyes out. The only thing stopping me is

knowing our parents will be back before long. That's all that's stopping me from inflicting on him the kind of pain he has so eagerly inflicted on me.

His shoulders rise and fall in a heavy sigh that doesn't do anything to make me feel nicer toward him. "We'll work this out," he insists in a softer voice, his blue eyes troubled when I force myself to meet them. "But we can't do it if you lock yourself away like this. It's not going to get you anywhere."

"Since when do you care? I mean it." At least he looks like my attitude hurts a little. He deserves so much worse, but I guess this is a start. I have a little power.

"Fine, whatever. I'm not going to talk in circles." When he gets off the bed, I'm not sure how I feel. I should be relieved—all I want is for him to leave me alone, right? Yet here I am, startled at how suddenly he's turned away.

All he was doing was going to the hall to bring in the tray of food. "Guess I'll have somebody replace that door before they get back," he murmurs, setting the tray on the bed. "Enough with the hunger strike."

The sight of a thick turkey sandwich is too much to resist. My pride isn't stronger than my empty stomach. Grabbing half the sandwich with both hands, I raise it to my mouth and take a huge bite. It's all I can do to keep from moaning happily before taking another greedy bite.

I'm almost finished with that first half before I slow down to catch my breath. I can't stand the idea of looking at him, so I stare down at the food instead.

"I'm really sorry for what happened. I know it's hard for you to believe," he mutters, "and I know it's easy for me to say now, but it is the truth. I don't know what it is about her and why she has to be so..."

"Vile?" I whisper before picking up the second half of the sandwich.

"That's one word for her."

"She might have sent them out, but she didn't take them, did she?" I glance up at him from under my lashes. He winces but says nothing. "If those pictures never existed, she couldn't send them to everybody."

It's a surprise when he slowly nods. A muscle ticks in his jaw and his nostrils flare like he's pissed, but he doesn't argue with me. "I know," he murmurs. "And I am sorry. I really am. I wasn't really going to send them out."

Now that is worth a laugh. “Right. You were just joking when you threatened me over and over.”

“I wasn’t joking. I...” He sighs and stares down at the tray, lifting a shoulder. “I don’t know what I was doing anymore. I wouldn’t have hurt you like that.”

Something about this sudden contrite attitude sets my teeth on edge. “No, you’ve already hurt me in so many other ways. I guess you have your limits, though.”

“I’m trying,” he grunts, finally lifting his cowardly head to look me in the eye. He’s a big, tough guy when there’s a door between us, but now he can barely stand to look at me. Typical bully.

“Well, thank you so much,” I snap. There is something way too gratifying about seeing him flinch. It makes me feel powerful, which is something I’m not used to feeling. I grab onto it with both hands and hold it tight. “But you’re out of your mind if you think coming in here and apologizing with a sandwich and a couple of cookies is going to make anything better. It’s not. I will never forgive you for this.”

“But I told you—”

“And I heard you,” I remind him, before he has the chance to stumble through talking his way out of it. “That doesn’t change anything. You did what you did, and I am not going to let it go just because your conscience is bothering you now. You deserve it. I hope it eats away at you,” I grunt. It is much too nice, seeing the effect I’m having on him. I could see myself getting addicted to payback if payback is this sweet.

And I’ve barely scratched the surface.

Every silent second that passes only strengthens my resolve. This is how it has to be. It’s not my fault nobody ever taught him about facing the repercussions of his actions. I’m just the person who’s had to suffer for it. For the way he walks through life, acting like he’s untouchable. Never thinking about the effect he’ll have on other people. Selfish and arrogant.

Right now, he isn’t only Carter. He’s every stupid, petty, childish bully I’ve ever faced. He is everyone who has ever tried to break me.

He’s the person who has come the closest.

But he still didn’t succeed.

“Now that you know I’m eating,” I mutter after swallowing a bite, “you can go. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

At least he doesn't waste time trying to force me into forgiving him. At least he spares me that. All he does is stand up and leave the room silently, without giving me another look. I really hope he doesn't have the audacity to turn this around and get mad at me for not giving him what he wants.

But something tells me he will.

With the mood I'm in, I don't really care. In fact, I hope he does get mad. Because I'm mad, too. It feels good to be mad and to actually show it instead of trying to hide it for fear of retaliation.

I used to be afraid to push too hard in case he wanted to hurt me.

Now? The damage has been done, and I almost wish he would try again so I can have the excuse to take my anger out on him.

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TWENTY-ONE

Carter

I DON'T KNOW what it is that makes me dread getting out of the truck. I drove all the way over here, fighting with myself the whole time, going back-and-forth over whether this was a good idea. Instead of turning around and going back home, I kept driving. Now there's nowhere left to go but up to the front door. So why is my ass glued to the seat?

Because I know it will be chewed out once I go inside.

Hell, at this rate, I'm not even sure anyone will open the door. This is the textbook definition of a last-ditch effort. Taking my pride in my hands. Ready to beg for help if that's what it takes, because it's what I need. Help. Something has to get through to her, and it's not going to be me. She hates me way too much.

That's what got me in the car. That's why I'm sitting in front of Briggs's house now. His car is out here, so I know he's home at least, but it's Wren I need to talk to. I need advice, and she is probably the only person who can give it to me.

I jump, startled, when my phone buzzes with an incoming text. It's Maya, surprisingly. *You had better not think either of us would let you in this house after what you did.*

So she's in there, too. Instead of intimidating me—I'm fucked up over all of this, but I'm not that fucked up—I'm glad. I could use all the help I

can get. Between the two of them, one of them has to know the trick to getting Elliana to...

What? What is it I want? I know they're going to ask. I better have an answer prepared. What do I want from her? Forgiveness, for sure. I don't think I could stand living under the same roof with her hating me as bitterly as she does now. I'm not asking for us to be best friends by morning. I'm not asking for anything other than forgiveness over something I never meant to happen. The thought of her turning her back because of this is a thought I can't endure.

I need your help. I'm only asking for advice. You know by now I didn't send those pictures out. I need to try to make it right somehow. Please, I add, since it seems like the right thing to do. This is new territory for me. Laying it on the line like this, admitting I need help.

It's no surprise when they leave me hanging for a while. I can almost see them in there, deciding whether or not to take pity on me.

"Come on, come on," I whisper, staring up at the house from behind the wheel, drumming my fingers against my thighs. When the front door slowly swings open, I release a sigh of relief that ends as soon as Maya appears in the doorway with Wren standing next to her.

"Well?" she calls out loud enough that her voice echoes across the front courtyard. "Are you coming in, or what?"

Okay, then.

I can't shake the feeling that I'm walking toward the electric chair as I climb the stairs leading up to the doorway where the girls wait, arms folded. "This had better be good," Maya growls.

"Where are the guys?" I ask, wiping my suddenly sweaty palms on my shorts.

"Tucker dropped Maya off, then he and Briggs went to the store," Wren explains. She glares at me just as hatefully as Maya does, but at least she answers. It seems like all Maya is capable of right now is glaring at me like she wants to rip my head off and maybe shit down my neck when she's finished.

"Get it over with," Maya spits out, tapping her foot on the floor. She hasn't moved. She doesn't plan on letting me into the house.

But it's not her house, is it? When I shoot Wren a look, she tugs the hem of Maya's loose T-shirt. "Come on. Let's let him in, hear what he has to say."

“I’m really not interested in what he has to say.” Still, she steps aside, huffing when she does. If anything, I’m sort of glad she’s acting like this. It means Elliana has people in her corner who actually give a shit. For once, she’s got friends.

And she’s going to need people by her side once she stops hiding and has to show her face in the world.

“Come on. Sit down.” Wren waves me toward the living room off the front entry hall. I look up the stairs, asking a question without saying a word. “She’s playing video games with her friends online,” Wren explains, referring to Briggs’s little sister. “She won’t come down.”

“Though who knows? Maybe she should,” Maya adds with a bitter laugh that tells me she is way past anger and sliding into rage, maybe hatred. “This way, she will always remember to protect herself from people who make it their mission to cause misery.”

It’s not like Wren looks any happier with me as we walk into the living room, but at least she doesn’t snarl at me like a rabid animal. Instead, she sits on the sofa and crosses her legs under her before folding her hands in her lap. “Okay. You’re here. What is it you want to say?”

Straight to it. The back of my neck prickles, and my skin feels cold and a little sweaty. “I need your help. You both know it was Tiana who sent those pictures around. I was unconscious. I didn’t have a clue she was doing it, I swear.”

“But you realize she wouldn’t have gotten the idea to do it in the first place if you didn’t make it seem like it was okay to bully Elliana. Right? You understand that?” Wren asks while Maya smirks at me.

“I know. And I already told her to cut it with that shit,” I insist. Just the thought of it makes my blood boil. “I warned her to leave Elliana alone, or she would have to deal with me, but she did it anyway.”

“Because she’s twisted,” Wren mutters. Her lip curls in disgust before she exchanges a look with Maya, who pretty much wears the same expression.

“Fine.” Maya shrugs, glancing toward Wren once she flops onto the sofa next to her. “Good for you. You’re not a completely heartless bastard. Only somewhat.”

“You shouldn’t have had those pictures of her in the first place,” Wren reminds me, like she needs to. Like I don’t already know.

I have to deliberately bite back that comment, since I'm lucky they even want to talk to me. "Listen, for what it's worth, I'm ashamed of myself now."

"Now," Maya repeats before her lips thin out until I can barely see them.

"Maybe you should've thought of that sooner," Wren murmurs. The disappointment in her voice is heavy enough that I want to run away from it. That's not what I do. I don't run away.

But I've never been through anything like this before, either. I don't know how to feel or why all of these conflicting thoughts are running through my head in the first place. It's a lot to wrestle with.

"You're right," I agree, nodding, folding my hands behind my back as I stand in front of them. Like the accused, standing in front of the jury. Only I don't think the jury is supposed to flat-out look like they can't wait to fry the accused. "I should've thought about it. I should've thought about a lot of things. I can't take any of it back now, though I wish I could. You have no idea how much I wish I could."

"Because your parents are going to come back from their honeymoon, eventually?" Damn, Maya is determined to not give a single inch. She's looking for a fight, her shoulders hunched around her ears, glaring coldly at me.

"I hadn't thought about it until now. But no," I tell her, shaking my head, "this isn't about them. It's about hoping I can get through to Elliana."

"Why? What for?" Wren asks.

"What you did is despicable," Maya whispers, and now her voice trembles. Like all this time, she's been trying to hold back her real emotions.

"Because there is no way she would have let you take those pictures if you'd asked her," Wren points out, not like she needs to.

"I know, I know," I groan, scrubbing my hands through my hair before letting my arms drop to my sides again. "Look, you can cut off my balls and roast them in the oven if you want to, but let's do that later. Right now, I need to figure out how to get through to her. I need her to understand I never would've done that, that I'm sorry it happened, and I wish I could do something to take it all away."

Wren's eyes narrow. "Have you thought about telling her all of this yourself?"

“I did already.” The girls exchange a look that makes me groan again. “I’m serious.”

“And?” Maya prompts.

“And I ended up coming over here. Obviously, it didn’t go all that well. She understands I didn’t send the pictures out, but she won’t forgive me.”

With a soft snort, Maya mutters, “Good for her. I’m glad she’s standing up for herself.”

“But she has to forgive me,” I blurt out, making both girls widen their eyes. “That’s why I need your help. I need you guys to talk to her for me.”

“Oh, please.” Maya even claps as she laughs loudly at me. “You’ve gotta be kidding. You want us to convince her to forgive you and act like this didn’t happen?”

“I don’t expect she could act like it didn’t happen. I know she can’t forget about it. And I know shit is going to be tough for her, at least for a little while.”

“Yeah, you think?” Maya snaps. No more laughter. She’s too busy looking like she is considering cutting my balls off here and now instead of waiting.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to betray her that way, which is exactly what I would be doing if I tried to talk her into letting this go. You’ve violated her,” she reminds me in a trembling voice. “And we are her friends. What you’re talking about sounds like gaslighting.”

“It’s not!” I didn’t want to start a fight, but everybody has their limit. “Fuck, are you seriously going to sit there and pretend like either of your boyfriends didn’t fuck with you like it was their mission in life? But that didn’t stop you from forgiving them, did it? Moving in with them, having a relationship with them?”

Shit. I only realize when Wren’s eyes pop open wide that I said too much.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” I quickly add, before either of them can say anything. “It’s not like that with us. But just because I don’t want to fuck her doesn’t mean I don’t want her forgiveness.”

Who am I trying to convince? Because like it or not, fucking her is something I could get used to. Losing myself in her...

“I only want to make it right,” I tell them with a sigh. “That’s all. And if you could help me with that, it would mean everything. Like I said, I can’t

change what happened, but if there's anything I can do to help her, I want to. How can I try if she won't even talk to me?"

Wren chews her lip before heaving a sigh, like she's afraid she's going to regret this. "We were already going to offer to drive her to school tomorrow," she says while Maya folds her arms again. "We can try to talk to her. At least remind her you're sorry and want to try to make it up to her."

"But I am not forcing her," Maya warns. "So don't even think it's going to be that easy."

"I don't think anything is going to be easy," I reply, and that's the truth. I know better by now. "Just... anything you can do."

Because I can't stand the memory of the hatred burning in her eyes when she was eating. There I was, doing everything I could to make her face me, and when she did, there was nothing I could do but wither under the heat of her glare.

It's still weighing on me on the drive home. There is nothing like knowing how deeply a decent, innocent person is hurting, and knowing I'm the one who made it happen.

She didn't deserve it.

She's going to face a whole new level of shit from people around school if she even bothers going back. I can only hope the girls convince her that it's the only thing she can do. That hiding is the same as giving up, and giving up means letting the bastards win.

It's a shame I'm one of the bastards.

I've only been gone less than an hour, but a lot of changes have gone down since then. I figured she would find something to shove in front of the busted door I need to get fixed, but instead she took her bedding to one of the spare rooms. There's a light coming from a door down the hall, while her bedroom is dark.

She must hear my footsteps, or maybe she was listening for the truck. Either way, a text comes through while I'm standing in the hallway, feeling like I should say something to her, wondering if she would listen.

Don't even think about screwing around with my room. And don't bother kicking this door in, because I'll just move to another room.

Instead of texting back, I walk up to the door she's locked behind. "I get why you want to shut me out." It's actually getting easier to talk to a door. I've done so much of it since last night. "But you can't shut me out forever.

I'm going to do whatever it takes to make things right. I only need you to tell me what you want me to do."

This time, she doesn't keep me waiting. Another text comes through right away. *I'm pretty sure you don't actually want to know what I wish you would do right now.*

What is it going to take? All I can do as I go to my room and hope the girls meant it when they said they would help bring her around. I will do whatever it takes to get through to her—but first, she needs to stop wishing me dead. Otherwise, I might as well keep talking to doors for all the difference it will make.

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TWENTY-TWO

Elliana

I'M ACTUALLY KIND OF surprised he let me sleep through the night without kicking the door in again or doing something else to terrorize me. The house is silent when I wake up on Thursday morning.

It's almost eerie. Right away, questions hit me from all sides, and it's exhausting. I just opened my eyes, and my mind is already spinning. There's no way to get a break from it.

Is he going to school today? Or is he going to shadow me around? I know he doesn't really care how I feel. He's scared I'll retaliate. That's why he won't leave me alone. He has to think I'm stupid if he wants me to believe anything different.

I'm not sure how I would retaliate; unless I told our parents, which I would definitely not do. For one thing, it would be too humiliating—I can't even imagine how I would explain it. Why he had those pictures in the first place. Why I didn't say something a long time ago? I could have ended all of this before it started by going straight to Paul and telling him everything.

So why didn't I? Because I was trapped. None of this is my fault—I can't blame myself for anything I did, the choices I made. If I told Paul, Carter would have found a way to get back at me, obviously. And it would've been brutal. Worse than things already are.

Only now I have to show my face sometime, right? So it's not Carter's bullying I have to worry about. It's everybody else.

It's almost funny, the way my phone rings while I'm imagining the misery I know I'm going to face once I step foot out of the house. I don't even want to answer when I see it's only Wren calling. As much as I need kindness, I don't know if I have the energy to handle it. Of course, that makes me feel like the most ungrateful person in the entire world, but I can't help it. I never knew it took so much energy to be pitied.

"Hey, you." All right, at least she doesn't sound like she's choosing every word carefully in case I break down. That's a good start. "We thought we would give you a ride to school today, me and Maya. Carter already knows. You won't even have to sit in the car with him."

So they've been talking about me? I can't even think about that right now. Not when the idea of showing my face at school is almost enough to paralyze me. "I don't think I can go today."

"You can't skip again. It will end up tanking your grades."

Like I care about grades. Like I care about anything. "I just don't think I can handle it. You know how it's going to be."

"But if you stay home again, they win. You get that, right? Everybody who wants to put you down wins, because they'll think you're running away and hiding."

"They wouldn't be wrong."

"Do you really want to give them that power? I've been where you are now, or close to it," she reminds me. "I know how it feels when all you want to do is forget everything. You want to keep yourself safe."

"Yes, I do."

"But that's not really safety. Please," she urges. "Don't do that to yourself. This will pass. And you'll have Maya and me with you."

Not always. We don't have class together. But she has a point, too. I shouldn't let these assholes hold me back. I'm not going to wreck my college education because of them. I can't give them that power.

"Fine," I decide with a sigh. "Thank you. I'll be ready in half an hour."

"Great. We'll be there." She sounds relieved as we end the call. I have to remind myself how much sadder and grayer my life was before I found a friend who actually cares. I still don't quite understand why, but then she understands what it's like. I can't forget that. She and Maya both get it.

And somehow, they were able to forgive the guys who bullied them. I don't know if I have that in me. Forgiving and forgetting. I never would've considered myself somebody who holds a grudge—I mean, I wouldn't open

myself up to friendship with any of the people who hurt me back in high school, but that's because I would know they didn't mean it. They would only be trying to trick me into letting my guard down.

This is different. This is somebody I have no choice but to share space with. What a disgusting thought. Forced to be around him. Every time I see him, remembering how many times he took advantage of me, how many times he forced me.

How frantic he sounded when he came back the night the photos went out. Not like I was in the mood to feel sorry for him that night. I'm still not in the mood two days later, forcing myself out of bed. I want him to suffer. I want him to live in fear of the moment I decide to tell our parents what he did. I won't, but he doesn't know that.

The little spark that thought ignites in me is enough to push me through the motions of getting ready. Pulling on one of my sweaters feels like pulling on armor that will defend me from the assholes who I'm sure are waiting to pile on even more humiliation today. Wren is right. I can't let them hold me back. Carter included.

There's a bowl and spoon in the sink, telling me he got up earlier than usual and had breakfast. His truck isn't in the driveway. Is he trying to avoid me? Thank God for small favors. It's probably better that he does. For both our sakes.

I'm ready to go by the time somebody taps a horn in front of the house. At least, I'm dressed and everything. Whether I'm mentally prepared is another story. I'm barely even ready to step outside, where the glare of the sun is the first thing that greets me. I wish I could shrink to nothing and fade away, even when I know there are two friends waiting for me in the car.

Though they're not waiting for long. Before I'm halfway down the steps, they're both opening their doors so they can come out and give me a hug. It's nice, it really is, even if it still feels a little awkward because they must've seen those pictures, too.

"Come on. Let's face the world." Maya takes me by the shoulders and gives me a firm nod while Wren opens the back door for me. "If anybody fucks with you, we fuck with them right back. Got it? We are not leaving you alone."

"You really don't have to do that. I don't want to cause trouble for either of you."

“You think we care?” Wren waves a hand like it doesn’t matter. “We’ve got your back.”

I can’t act like I’m not grateful, because I am.

“Thank you,” I whisper, then practically throw myself into the car because if this goes on much longer, I’ll start bawling my eyes out. I’ve done enough of that lately.

“So, listen.” Wren shoots Maya a look before turning in the passenger seat. “I’m only doing this because he came begging last night. You know how Tiana is. Carter didn’t have anything to do with sending those pictures, and he feels awful about it. He really does.”

“Is that what this is all about? Did he put you up to driving me?” Could I survive if I pitched myself out of the car right now?

“No, he didn’t put us up to anything. We were already going to offer to drive you in today.” Maya glances at me in the rearview mirror, and it’s obvious she’s angry. “Honestly, I’m not trying to defend him at all. He’s a pig for taking those pictures and keeping them on his phone in the first place.”

Then she sighs. “But he did seem really upset and very sorry. For what it’s worth.”

“We’re on your side, a hundred percent.” Wren narrows her eyes before adding, “And if anybody messes with you today, we want to know about it. I’m serious.”

“Okay.” I’m too overwhelmed to argue, and it’s not like I can’t use the help.

So he went to them. That’s where he disappeared to last night while I switched rooms. I don’t know if it’s annoying as hell or maybe slightly sweet. It couldn’t have been easy for him to swallow his pride.

Not that he’s any kind of hero. I wish he would stop trying to be decent so I could flat-out hate him. Besides, he’s not really being decent. He’s trying to cover his ass so I won’t rat him out. He needs my forgiveness to save himself, that’s all. It’s almost a mantra I have to repeat to myself the whole way to school.

“Oh, you’re fucking kidding me.” Maya’s disgusted grunt pulls me away from the tangled web of my thoughts and into the present, where a familiar and extremely unwelcome person stands chatting with friends on the path leading from the parking lot. Almost like she’s waiting for me.

“I swear to God, Tiana will not be satisfied until somebody kicks her ass again,” Maya growls. “She is evil incarnate.”

“Maybe I should just go home,” I whisper, frozen in the backseat. “I can’t do this. I just can’t.”

“No. Absolutely not. Unacceptable.” Before I know it, Maya is out of the car, slamming the door and marching toward Tiana with her fists clenched at her sides.

“Oh, shit,” Wren whispers. It’s worry that gets me out of the car at last, but I don’t have the courage to take a step toward where Maya stands in front of Tiana with her arms folded.

“What’s your problem?” Tiana asks with a bright, fake smile.

“You are,” Maya barks. “And you’re pathetic. Unless you want another ass-kicking like the one I already gave you, you’re gonna move on. Walk away. Now.”

Tiana stares at her until it’s obvious Maya is not going to back down. I can only stand back and watch—but I don’t look away when Tiana’s gaze swings toward me. I stare her down, too, if only from a distance. But that’s still a lot better than shrinking back the way I usually would.

“Grow up, Tiana,” Wren adds. “Doing stuff like this is the only way you feel relevant. It’s pathetic. Maybe you should spend your time developing a personality instead.”

Her eyes go narrow, and her jaw tightens, but all she does is toss her head before turning around and stomping off. There’s soft laughter from a group of kids sitting on the lawn, which only makes her walk faster. I’m not going to lie to myself. This is not the last I’ll see of her. I can only hope she thinks twice before starting any more trouble.

“Come on.” Maya returns to the car to get her bag, gritting out her words. Her face is flushed, her eyes bright. “I’m not a violent person, but I swear that girl is asking for it.”

Note to self: don’t get on Maya’s bad side.

“Ignore them,” Wren whispers, walking on my right while Maya walks on my left. Some of the lowest of the low insist on chuckling and whistling as we cut across the quad. It’s not bad enough I’ve been humiliated. They need to rub my nose in it. A couple of girls giggle, but a quick glare from Wren shuts them up, and for the most part, the walk to class is bearable.

It’s when I have to separate from them to actually go into the lecture hall that my heart starts pounding against my ribs so hard, I’m afraid I’ll

crack a bone. Carter's in this class. Bile churns in my stomach, and I regret being too nervous to eat breakfast, but then I'd have only thrown it up thanks to my nerves.

"It'll be okay," I whisper, pulling my sleeves over my fists, pretending not to hear soft laughter as a group of thick-neck jocks passes by. Nothing better to do.

I'll be okay. I need to remind myself of that. I cannot give these people power. They don't deserve it.

I feel him as soon as I open the door. His presence in the air. Instead of looking around for him, I keep my eyes focused straight ahead and take an empty aisle seat a few rows down from the back. That way, I can duck out as soon as class is over and be out of the room in no time. Fewer people can see me when I'm back here, too.

Unfortunately, there are still plenty of people who can, including a pair of jerks who sit down behind me and loudly make themselves comfortable.

"Check it out," one of them mutters to the other, nudging the back of my chair with his foot. Like I can't hear them. "I've never sat this close to a model before."

"Just think. One day, when her pictures are all over the internet, we can say we knew her when she was just a freak who wore sweaters all the time."

Ignore it. They can't keep this up all throughout class. Once the professor stands up at the front of the hall, most of the noise and chatter quiets down.

Except for the chatter going on behind me.

"Not gonna lie. I jerked off to those pictures of you." He kicks the back of my chair again, whoever he is. "Hello. I'm talking to you. You should be flattered."

Right. I'm super flattered to know somebody jerked off to naked pictures of me that were taken and sent out without my consent. Every girl's dream.

"Maybe she's busy thinking about giving you a live show," his friend jokes. "She's just too shy to admit it."

Hatred. So much hatred. Enough to make my skin crawl and a cold sweat to coat the back of my neck. It's not even so much what they're saying that has me feeling this filthy and disgusting. I can deal with that. I've dealt with much worse.

It's knowing Carter's here. He could be watching. I barely turn my head, scanning the room from the corner of my eye. Where is he? Is he paying attention? Who am I kidding—I'm sure he is.

Finally, I catch him. He's at the other end of the row behind me.

And he's glaring this way. His face is red enough that he looks sunburnt. Does he feel bad knowing he set this off? It's almost enough to balance out the humiliation, imagining him hating himself for putting me through it.

"That's why she wears those sweaters all the time," one of the guys snickers. "She knows if she flashed those tits around campus, nobody would be able to get any studying done."

"It's always the quiet ones, right?"

There's a sudden noise from the other end of the row, and I look to find Carter bolting up from his seat. *Oh, no.* But instead of cutting across the row, he takes the stairs up and out of the room, letting the door slam behind him.

Okay...

Not five seconds pass before the door closer to my end of the row opens and his feet pound down the stairs until he comes to a stop behind me.

"What the fuck is wrong with you guys?" he demands, and he's not quiet about it. Pretty soon most of the people in the lecture hall turn around to watch, including me, totally disregarding the professor and the lesson. Granted, I wasn't paying attention in the first place, but that's another story.

"Well?" he snaps, giving the guy sitting behind me a shove. "How about I sit behind you and kick your chair for fifty minutes? How does that sound?"

"Yo, man, what's your problem?" The jock who got shoved stands up with his chest puffed out and locks eyes with Carter, who stares him down. "What, you send out those pictures and now you feel guilty or some shit?"

"You're gonna sit back down," Carter growls, "or your ass is gonna end up at the bottom of the stairs. It's up to you."

I can't handle this. Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, I have to sit and witness Carter picking fights because he cares all of a sudden. While the two of them continue facing off and the professor shouts at them from the front of the lecture hall, I get my things together and bolt up the few steps between me and the door. Let the two of them beat the shit out of each other. I don't have to stick around it.

I burst out of the room, breathless and shaking, leaning against the wall next to the door for balance. This is a nightmare. I never should've left the house.

The door swings open, and I brace myself for more humiliation, but it wasn't Carter I expected to see barreling out.

"Are you okay?" he asks with his chest heaving as he takes one ragged breath after another.

All it takes is one look at his flushed face to set a match to the powder keg in my head. All at once the pressure explodes, and I shove him, snarling. It feels too good.

"Am I okay? No, I'm fucking not okay," I hiss, careful to keep my voice down as curious people walk past in both directions. "What was that? Trying to make yourself feel better by sticking up for me? Well, it didn't work, did it? You just made everything so much worse."

"What, by stopping them from humiliating you?"

"You just painted a target on my back, you stupid asshole." His head snaps back and his eyes fly open wide, and that feels good, too. I should have told him off like this a long time ago, maybe every single day. "Don't do me any favors, okay? And if you're looking to ease your guilt, look elsewhere. I'm not interested."

I'm only halfway turned around, ready to run, when he grabs my arm to hold me in place. "Just wait," he mutters. "I was trying to help."

Yanking my arm free, I whisper, "Leave me alone. Pretend we don't know each other. Otherwise..." The idea hits me, and the words start coming out before I can help it. "Otherwise, our parents will find out about what you did as soon as they get home. Or maybe I'll call them now, bring them home early. How does that sound?"

Watching his face fall might be the most satisfying thing I've seen in days. After taking a second to savor the feeling, I whisper, "Forget I exist." Then practically run for the nearest exit.

It doesn't take long for all that satisfaction to turn into tears. Forget waiting for a ride home. I'll get an Uber. I just have to get out of here, away from everybody.

Nobody can say I didn't try.

TWENTY-THREE

Carter

WHAT THE FUCK do I have to do? What do I have to say? How can I get her to stop looking at me as the enemy? Running a hand through my hair, I let out a deep sigh, lost in resentment.

“Carter. What the fuck, man?”

Great. This is what I need now. To be followed out here by these two assholes. Jackson and Dave come straight at me, because why make it a fair fight?

“I didn’t start any shit with you,” I remind Dave, who just sat there silently before. “So don’t fucking start with me.”

With a sneer, he replies, “You started shit with my friend, and you’re the one who sent those fucking pictures around, man.”

“I took them,” I correct him. “I didn’t send them.”

“Oh, is that what you need to tell yourself so you don’t feel like a slimy fucking prick?” Jackson demands. Now that we’re out of the classroom, he’s found his balls, placing both hands against my chest and shoving me against the wall at my back. “Don’t waste your time. Everybody knows what you did, and everybody knows you’re acting like it wasn’t your fault. Fucking hypocrite.”

Something inside me is going to explode any second. “Just get out of my face,” I warn, breathing heavy, looking back-and-forth between them while people passing through start to pay attention. “I mean it. Walk away.”

“Or what?” Jackson sneers before lunging at me.

Nobody can say I didn’t try to stop this.

“Fucker!” That’s all Jackson gets out before he collides with me, swinging for my jaw. I move in time for his punch to glance off me, and it throws him off balance. All it takes is my fist against his stomach for him to double over, gasping for air before dropping to his knees.

Dave’s face is red by the time he steps in and takes me by my collar before I can react. The world goes bright white when he makes contact with my cheek. It feels like my face is on fire when I double over, then drive my body against his, slamming him against the opposite wall and knocking the breath out of him. He’s gasping when I do what he did to me, taking a fistful of his T-shirt and hammering him with one punch after another.

“Lay off!” Jackson bellows in my ear, and all that gets him is a sharp, upward strike to his face from my elbow. He falls back so I can continue painting Dave’s face red. He’s barely conscious and slumped against the wall by the time I finish, and I let him drop before turning back to Jackson.

“Bet you wish you hadn’t started shit now,” I mutter, smiling at the sight of blood coating my right fist. “You want some more?”

I don’t give him a chance to answer, taking him by the shoulders with both hands and bending him forward so my knee can make contact with his nose. It feels too fucking good. I can’t stop. Now there are shouts around us, people telling me to stop, but what the fuck do they know?

“Enough!” I barely hear the voice bellowing close to my ear before something stops my fist from cutting through the air again. Another hand is wrapped around it.

A hand belonging to Richard Kingsley.

Fuck my life.

There’s shock in his eyes, maybe even horror. “Carter! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He looks back to where Dave is on the floor, and I follow the direction of his gaze. Am I supposed to be sorry the fucker is lying there, his face covered in blood? He has a hand pressed to his jaw, and he’s sobbing like the pussy he is. Richard goes to him, crouches beside him, barking for someone to call an ambulance. For fuck’s sake. I barely did anything to him.

At least, that’s what I think before Richard joins me. “It looks like his jaw is broken,” he announces in a soft but deadly voice. “My office, if you

know what's good for you."

Now that the white-hot rage is starting to fade, I see what I did. More importantly, I see what it could mean for me. There's the sound of soft weeping from some of the girls gathered around as Richard steers me through the crowd, his hand now wrapped around the back of my neck.

"I cannot believe what I just witnessed," he mutters as we walk.

"I can explain—"

"Save it until we're alone. What the hell do you think your father is going to think about this when he finds out?"

All of a sudden, my insides go icy. What's Dad going to think? I don't have to imagine it. Might as well kiss my ass goodbye, along with my truck, my phone, my freedom.

"You realize if his parents decide to press charges, this is going to get much worse. I might have to expel you," Richard whispers as we make our way down the hall toward his office. "I won't have a choice in the matter. How could you do anything that stupid?"

I wish I knew. Like he said, I can't really talk about it out here, so I keep my thoughts to myself as we walk past his assistant's desk. He only lets go of me once we are alone in his office with the door closed.

Then he steps up toe-to-toe, not bothering to hide his anger. "Well? Why did you do it? What were you thinking, Carter?"

"They came at me. I swear," I insist when he rolls his eyes. "I told them to walk away. It started in class. They were..."

Shit. It's only now that I see I'm incriminating myself. Either I tell him why those pricks were messing with Elliana, and I'm the bad guy in the end, or I don't, and I'm still the bad guy when he finds out by word of mouth about the pictures. I've basically backed myself into a corner there's no way out from.

"They were what?" he snaps. "Explain yourself. Now."

Pussy. Coward. "They were bullying Elliana. My stepsister. Ask anybody who was in Professor Hayworth's class just now. I told them to stop, and she ran out because she was so upset. I followed her. They followed me."

He doesn't look convinced, eyeing me warily, but at least he backs up a step. "Can Elliana confirm this?"

Like she would, hating me the way she does. "She ran off before they came out, but I'm sure she would tell you the things they were saying to her

in class. I only wanted them to stop. I guess they didn't like me telling them off or something. I don't know."

"They attacked you outside the lecture hall?"

At least I can be honest about that. "I really did warn them not to do it."

"Because you understand the way this looks, don't you? What it means for the son of the chief of police to break another student's jaw here on campus?" Eyeing my bloody fist, he jerks his head in the direction of an open door close to his desk. "My bathroom is that way. Wash your hands and face."

Gladly. Anything to get away from his disapproving glare for a few seconds. There's a welt coming up on my cheek, but that's pretty much the worst of the damage either of them managed to hand me. I guess that will teach them a lesson about starting fights they can't finish.

My satisfaction is short-lived, though, because Dad is in Thailand, living it up with his new wife, clueless to what's going to happen. Richard's going to have to tell him, especially if Dave ends up in the hospital with a broken jaw. Fuck, I didn't hit him that hard, did I? It's sort of a blur now. I wasn't thinking, I was acting. I was letting go of the rage and frustration that had me locked up tight.

At least I'm feeling more clear-headed by the time the pink-tinged water runs down the drain. I was able to vent that anger before it rotted me from the inside.

But what's the cost? Because my peace of mind sure as hell doesn't last long. By the time I'm finished, Richard is on the phone at his desk, speaking quietly. Our eyes meet, and I wouldn't be surprised if I burst into flames on the spot. "I understand. We'll be waiting to hear your decision. In the meantime, let me assure you we're dealing with things on our side." After a few more endless moments, he hangs up, then leans back in his chair with his eyes closed. "His parents are going to press charges."

I know what that means, and the thought makes my stomach churn. Pressing charges means a police report, which means Dad finding out about this. "Are you sure? Can you talk them out of it?"

"Carter. Are you serious?" He opens his eyes just wide enough to give me a bitter look. "Are you asking me to talk them out of reporting this attack to the police? A couple of angry, horrified parents who are now on their way to the hospital to meet up with their son? You think I would try to influence them for your sake?"

“I’m just saying. Maybe there’s a way—”

“You think you’re very grown-up,” he seethes, cutting me off like I wasn’t even speaking. “A lot like Tucker. You go and do something like you did just now, thinking you understand consequences—or disregarding them in the first place, because nothing can touch you. I hate to break it to you, but you should know better by now. You broke a student’s jaw. The policies behind that kind of violence are the same for you as they are for anyone else. The fact that I’m even sitting here with you, having this conversation, is more preferential treatment than you deserve. I’m already going against my principles.”

The truth behind his heavy, disappointed speech starts to sink in. I can’t avoid this. “Can we at least keep it quiet until Dad gets back?” I ask. “He’s still in Thailand for another week—they get back next weekend. Can we keep it quiet until then, so it doesn’t ruin their honeymoon?”

Rubbing his temples, he shrugs. “I really don’t have any say over that. There’s a point where I have to step aside and let the police handle this the way it has to be handled.”

“What should I do?”

“Are you honestly asking?” I nod, leaning forward with my elbows on my thighs. He must have some idea of how to help me, because I am lost. “If I were you, I would call your dad. Right away.”

Not at all what I was hoping to hear. “Do you think so?”

“I would rather hear from my son than from a coworker.”

I see the point. That’s the way Dad thinks, too. “Okay,” I murmur, with my stomach churning, as I pull my phone out of my pocket. There are ten new texts waiting for me, most of them from Briggs and Tucker. Word spreads fast around here. I have to ignore them for now, pulling up Dad’s contact instead.

He doesn’t need to know the whole truth. What if Dave tells his parents where the photos came from, if he mentions them at all? I can always say it’s a lie, that they didn’t come from me, but I’ll deal with that if and when it happens. First, I have to get through this phone call.

It doesn’t hit me until the phone starts ringing on the other end that I have no idea what time it is in Thailand. It’s probably the middle of the night. But before I can point that out to Richard and promise to call later, Dad answers. “Carter? What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I...” It’s not so easy to have this talk with a witness sitting in front of me. He gets that, standing, raising a hand like he’s the one who needs to feel uncomfortable because he leaves the room to give me privacy.

“Carter? Where did you go?” Dad asks with worry in his voice.

“I’m still here. I got in a fight, Dad. A bad one. The other guy’s parents want to press charges, so I thought I should call you and warn you in case somebody reaches out from the department.”

“A fight? Carter, what were you thinking? How serious is it that they’re pressing charges?”

“Pretty serious,” I groan, nauseously. “They ended up having to take him to the hospital. I... I might have broken his jaw.”

“Jesus Christ!” It’s something between a whisper and a scream, telling me Irene is asleep, and he doesn’t want to wake her. This might be the only time I’ve ever been grateful for her presence. “Why would you do that? What possible reason could you have had to beat a kid until you broke his jaw?”

“He and one of his friends were making fun of Elliana in class. I told them to stop. When they came at me outside of class, I told them to walk away. I did. I didn’t want to fight them. But they wouldn’t let up. And I...”

“Got carried away?” There’s not so much anger in his voice now. Hardly any at all, really. “Oh, Carter. This is a mess.”

“I know. I just couldn’t sit there and let them say those things to her while she was just sitting there, not bothering anybody.”

“What were they saying? No,” he decides before I can come up with something that doesn’t involve the truth. “You know what? I don’t need to know. I know she gets a lot of shit—she always has, according to Irene. At least now, she has somebody who is willing to stand up for her, and that means everything. I can’t say I’m proud of what you did, because I wouldn’t want anybody saying that to their kid if things were reversed, and you were the one with a broken jaw. But you stood up for family, and I’m proud of you for that.”

This just keeps getting worse. He might not be screaming at me, threatening to kill me, losing his shit about having to come home early to deal with me, but it turns out there are other punishments that are even worse. Like getting credit I don’t deserve. Like knowing if I wasn’t so cruel, none of this would’ve happened to begin with.

“Thank you for telling me,” Dad concludes in a heavy, almost sad voice. “We’ll deal with this when we get home. For now, I’ll handle any calls that come my way. If anyone questions you, tell the truth, be upfront, don’t be antagonistic or refuse to cooperate. Understood?”

“Understood.” I hope that doesn’t happen, but I know it probably will. They’ll want to get my side of the story.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt this conflicted. Knowing Dad thinks I’m some kind of hero when I know I’m anything but. Realizing I would like to be the kind of man he thinks I am. Somebody who stands up for family, who protects the people close to him. I didn’t protect Elliana. If anything, I was trying to protect myself, because the guys were right. I went after them not only for her sake, but for mine. Knowing the worse things get for her, the worse she can make them for me.

That needs to stop. I need to face up to my shit. I need to be the kind of man Dad thinks I am, because that’s the kind of man Elliana deserves.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Elliana

THE HOT WATER cascades over my skin as I wash the shampoo out of my long hair. Once the water runs clear, I take the conditioner bottle and squirt a healthy amount into my palm. I step out of the spray and massage the smooth liquid into the long strands when I feel the air shift in the bathroom.

A shiver runs down my spine as I realize I'm not alone. I quickly spin around, almost falling over my own two feet.

"Slow down. I don't feel like scraping you off the shower floor." I hear him chuckle a second before I see his blurry outline through the glass door.

"Get out!" I yell, trying my best to cover my chest and privates with my hands and arms.

"I've seen the good before, remember? No need to be shy now," he says nonchalantly while peeling his clothes off.

He can't be serious right now.

"Get out, Carter, I mean it!" I try again, but he continues to pull his shorts and underwear down his legs. He steps out of the pile of clothes and closer toward the shower.

"I swear I'm going to call your dad and tell him everything!" I threaten him as a last-ditch effort.

"No, you won't," Carter quips confidently, sliding the shower door open like he belongs here. Steam billows out of the stall and cool air washes over

me. "You wouldn't want to ruin our parent's honeymoon like that. You're a good girl. Always doing the right thing."

I blink my eyes, staring at his bruised cheek and busted lip. "What the hell happened to your face?"

He doesn't say anything at first. He just steps under the spray. I watch him grab hold of the liquid soap.

I cross my arms in front of my chest and lean against the cold shower wall. "What happened?" I ask again.

He shrugs his shoulder. "I guess you're going to find out, regardless. I got into a fight."

"Why?" Now genuinely curious.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is that they got what they deserved," he says ominously.

"They?"

"Just hand me the washcloth," he orders me, but I don't make a move.

He rolls his eyes and reaches around me to grab the cloth.

"I already used that."

"I know," he snaps, before winking at me. He pours a healthy amount of soap onto the rag before lathering it over his muscular body.

My eyes wander to his abs, where I notice a large bruise forming on his side. "Seriously, who did you get into a fight with? Did you really fight two guys?"

"Just let it go," Carter presses before going on to wash his short hair.

Why won't he tell me? The only reason I can come up with is that I know who they are, or that it has something to do with me. Then something pops into my mind. No... he wouldn't. Or would he...

"Did you fight those two jocks who were bothering me earlier?"

Carter closes his eyes and dips his head under the spray until the soap is washed out of his hair. When he leans his face away from the water, he asks, "What if I did?"

I can't believe this guy. I stare at Carter in shock as I try to make sense of his actions. Does he really think suddenly playing my hero is going to make me forget everything he has done to me? Everything he put me through.

"Can you say something, at least?"

"*Say something?*" I scoff. "And what would you like to hear? That I'm thankful you stood up for me when you are the reason they are targeting me

in the first place?"

Carter sighs and shakes his head. "I thought I was doing the right thing by breaking the guy's jaw."

"You broke his jaw!?" I yell, flabbergasted.

"He deserved it," Carter states, convincing himself of being a good guy.

"And you deserve more than a busted lip and a few bruises."

"For what I did to you, yes, but not for beating up those two morons. Even Dad agreed to that much."

"Your dad knows?" I ask, surprised.

"Yes, the police got involved. I had to tell him."

"But let me guess, you conveniently left the part out to why they were bullying me." Irritation fills my veins when I realize the way he painted himself to his father.

"Can we please stop talking about it? I know I fucked up. I'm trying to make it right."

"And you think beating up two of my bullies will make up for bullying me yourself?"

"No, but I figure it is a start," he admits ruefully.

I shake my head and sigh, annoyed by his inability to understand how much he hurt me. I don't even want to talk about this anymore. I want to rinse out my hair and get out of here.

"Can you switch with me? I need to wash the conditioner out."

"Since you asked so nicely." He smiles, taking a step toward me until his chest is pressed up against mine. Before I can object, he snakes an arm around me and pulls me closer to his body. My feet slip, and I grab onto his arms to stabilize myself.

"What are—" is all I get out before his lips are on mine in a searing kiss.

My whole body is stiff, my lips don't move, but that doesn't stop Carter from pulling me closer. He runs his hands over my skin, cupping my ass when he gets there.

I don't want to like it, I really don't, but my stupid body comes to life, anyway. His hands continue to roam over my body gently, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind.

He finally gives up on the kiss, but his lips are not done. He trails them along my jaw, peppering soft kisses over my sensitive skin. Before I realize

what I'm doing, I tilt my head to give him better access to my neck. I feel him grin against my flesh, and I almost groan in frustration.

"Carter, stop," I tell him meekly while still holding on to his arms.

"You don't mean that," he whispers against my throat, before kissing me there too.

His hands travel across my body in a sensual way, making my core heat and my resolve crumble. *Why does it have to feel so good when he touches me like this? Why am I so weak?*

I try to remember all the terrible things he's done to me, but his fingers sliding through my wet folds have my thoughts in disarray. He grinds his palm against my clit while sliding his middle finger into my waiting pussy.

I throw my head back with a gasp at the sudden intrusion. Carter cups my breast with his free hand, massaging it before taking my nipple between his fingertips. The slight pain mingles with the pleasure from my core, igniting something deep inside of me.

Carter keeps pressure on my clit while sliding his finger in and out of me at a leisurely pace.

"You're so tight, even on my finger," Carter murmurs before kissing my shoulder. Every time his lips touch my skin, a little of my resolve crumbles. The bastard knows it too.

I close my eyes and let my head fall back as I try to decide between giving in and shoving him away. He has nothing to hold over me now. If I let this happen, it's because I want to and nothing else.

As if Carter can read my mind, he says, "Stop overthinking it and let me make you feel good."

I straighten my head to look at him. The smug bastard has a smile on his face when he pulls his hand away from my pussy. He lifts his fingers and brings them to his mouth. Never breaking eye contact, he sucks his digits clean. Closing his eyes, he makes a mhhh sound like he just tasted something delicious.

I'm about to tell him to fuck off when he leans in for another kiss. This time my lips move against his on their own accord.

Oh, whatever. Fuck it.

I kiss him back. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me in, his hard cock pressed against my lower belly. I snake my arms around his neck and press my chest to his. He smirks against my lips, and I almost roll my eyes.

We stay intertwined for a few minutes, holding each other while kissing under the showerhead. It feels nice; nothing is rushed or forced. It's just two people connecting physically, enjoying each other's bodies.

When Carter breaks the kiss, a disappointed huff falls from my lips. He presses his forehead to mine, our faces inches from each other. My eyes lower to his swollen lips and all I can think about are those lips on me, on my body... my pussy.

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall," Carter orders, still a little out of breath from the intense kiss.

I bite my lip and untangle my arms from his body before turning around and placing my palms against the shower wall. The anticipation of his touch sends a shiver down my spine. My heart picks up speed as Carter positions himself behind me.

His hands find my hips, as he holds on to me possessively. The tip of his smooth cock slides through my folds and rubs against my already sensitive clit. I arch my back a little to give him better access and Carter wastes no time accepting my offer.

He thrusts inside of me, filling me completely in one go. "Fuck," we moan at the same time. His fingers dig into my hips almost painfully as he moves in and out of me, slowly at first.

Every time he pushes inside of me, I feel a little more stretched, his big cock spreading me open as he picks up speed. He holds onto me tightly as he starts to fuck me in earnest now, our skin slapping together and our moans echoing through the bathroom.

"Fuck, sorry." Carter suddenly slows down, and his hands disappear from my hips. "I got carried away," he explains. "That's probably going to leave bruises."

I look down at my hips, where red finger marks blossom on my skin. "I'm fine," I assure him. "Don't stop."

"I wasn't gonna," Carter replies in his cocky way. "I don't think there is much keeping me from staying inside of you until I come."

He leans in and places a soft kiss on my shoulder while thrusting deep inside of me. His hand comes around to cup my breast, his fingers skillfully play with my nipple while his other hand reaches around and between my legs.

I arch my back and widen my stance to give him better access. His fingertips find my aching clit, and I groan when he finally touches me there.

My nerve endings go haywire when he rubs furiously against my swollen clit. Pleasure explodes in my core with an orgasm that sneaks up on me.

My walls clench together as I come apart, making Carter groan in pleasure behind me. He fucks me through my release, while keeping pressure against my clit until it becomes too sensitive, and I squeeze my legs shut.

“Too much,” I whine as I push Carter’s hand away from my pussy.

“Noted.” He chuckles as his hands find their way back to my hips. This time his touch remains light, which is a stark contrast to his hard cock, threatening to split me in two.

“You feel so good when you come. I can still feel you pulsing around my dick. It’s amazing.” He grunts while keeping up a steady pace. “I want you to come again.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I tell him honestly.

“Yes, you can,” he quips confidently. “I bet I can make you come again.”

“I’m already overstimulated.”

“I’ll stimulate in a different way then,” he says mysteriously. Only when his hand travels to my ass and his fingers slip between my cheeks do I understand what he plans on doing.

“No,” I state sternly when I feel his thumb on my asshole. I instinctively stiffen up; my whole body going rigid.

“Jesus. Relax.” Carter chuckles like this is a joke to him. Anger bubbles up inside me.

“I mean it, Carter.”

“I won’t push inside,” he promises. “Just massaging it while I fuck you. I think you’re going to like it.” His thumb remains on my back hole while he continues to thrust himself into my tight channel.

I have to admit, it doesn’t feel terrible. It feels taboo, but the physical sensation is nothing but erotic to me. Pleasure builds, and I wonder if I could really come again.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” Carter grunts in between deep thrusts that have my toes curling. “I want to come inside of you so badly.”

“Don’t come inside of me! I’m not on birth control,” I warn.

“What if I want to take the chance?”

What the hell? I twist my head and look at him over my shoulder. He is smiling, but not in a joking way. It’s more like a challenge.

"I don't know what's wrong with you right now, but do not come inside of me... please." I add a genuine plea.

"All right, I won't," he says seriously, with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

I turn back to face the wall, and Carter goes back to fucking me in a satisfying rhythm. It only takes a few minutes before I can feel a second orgasm building.

My legs quiver, and my whole body is suddenly on fire. Carter somehow manages to go even deeper with his cock, hitting places inside of me that have my core tingle. His thumb continues to play with my asshole, and the more he stimulates me there, the better it feels.

Curiosity gets a hold of me, and I can't help but wonder what it would feel like if he did push inside. Would it hurt? Or would it give me more pleasure? I don't know, but I do know that I'm so turned on right now I almost find the courage to ask him.

Instead of speaking up, I find myself shifting, pressing backward just enough to meet his thrusts and maybe get him to accidentally slip in. The more I think about him forcing his thumb up my ass, the hornier I get. Something in the back of my mind tells me it's wrong to want that, but at this moment, I'm too turned on to care.

I'm so close to coming, I can taste the orgasm. Pleasure builds deep in my core, and my knees feel like they're about to give out. Carter's movements become erratic, his thumb almost breaching the tight ring of muscles.

I squeeze my eyes shut and lock my knees, knowing that I'm about to come apart. And then it happens. All at once, my orgasm explodes at the same time Carter pushes his thumb in my ass.

A loud moan rips from my throat as my whole body convulses with my release. Waves and waves of pleasure wash over me while Carter fills both of my holes. I can feel myself pulse around him as I slowly come down from my euphoric experience, and I'm vaguely aware of Carter pulling his thumb from my ass.

He quickly pulls out, groaning as he spills his cum all over my ass cheeks.

I blink my eyes open, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. Carter loops his arm around my torso and lets me lean against him. He gently guides us

under the spray and rinses the conditioner from my hair. I let my head fall back on his shoulder as he supports most of my weight.

We stand in the shower like that for a little while longer. After a few minutes, my mind clears, and my body returns to a semi-normal state.

“You said you wouldn’t push in,” I accuse.

“You loved it, like I knew you would. Your body was begging me,” Carter answers without missing a beat. “Let me clean you up so we can get out of here.”

He reaches for the washcloth, and I straighten up to stand on my own. He pours some body wash onto the rag and gently rubs it over my butt and a little between my legs. After the rinse again, Carter steps out and wraps himself up in a towel, before bringing me a towel. He holds it open for me, and I step inside, letting him dry me off before he fastens it around my torso.

“I’ll be right back. Just getting some clean clothes from my room,” he announces before disappearing from the bathroom.

I blink my eyes, staring at the door and wondering if that really just happened.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Carter

“DON’T GET THE WRONG IDEA.” I swear, this girl has a split personality. One minute she’s coming like there’s no tomorrow and the next, she’s giving me a stern look in the mirror once I’m dressed again and standing in the doorway to her bathroom.

“The wrong idea?” I ask. I can’t wait to hear this one.

“Yes.” She finishes drying her hair and sets the dryer on the counter. “We’re not screwing around in my room. You’ll have to find something else to do, since I’m getting ready for bed.”

“For bed.” She nods firmly before turning around to face me with her arms folded. “Now?”

“Yes, now,” she replies. “I’m tired.”

“There’s one problem with that, genius.”

I kind of love the way her eyes go narrow and her nostrils flare. Now that she’s found her voice, she loves using it, which means she won’t shy away from telling me or showing me exactly how much I piss her off. “Oh? What would that be?”

“It’s only six o’clock in the evening. Are you really going to sleep at six o’clock?”

Her mouth opens and snaps shut. “Fine, whatever. Maybe I won’t go to sleep right away. But I would like to rest.”

“How about you eat something first? I’m hungry. I could make us some dinner.”

Her eyebrow shoots up. “Really.”

“Really.”

“You. Making dinner.”

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

“You know what? I’m not even going to waste any time arguing about it. I would much rather see you in action.”

She’s trying and failing to hide her glee as we leave her room so she can follow me down the stairs and out into the kitchen. Our bare feet slap against the floor before she drags a chair away from the island and takes a seat, wrapping her legs around the chair legs and propping her chin in her hands.

“You don’t need to make it seem like you’re sitting down to watch a show.” When she doesn’t even twitch, I add, “Should I pop some popcorn? Really give you the full experience?”

“You know what? No, because I don’t want to ruin my appetite for whatever wonderful thing you’re about to cook.”

I told myself I wanted her to open up to me, didn’t I? That I would do anything to make her forgive and forget. I guess I can’t be too pissed that she’s feeling playful now. “Is it just like being a chef on your own show?” she asks while I look through the fridge.

“Yeah, except the audience won’t shut the hell up.”

There’s some shredded cheddar in here. Milk, eggs. I pull all of that out before going to the pantry for a box of macaroni. “What about macaroni and cheese?”

“You mean actual mac and cheese? Not the kind with the powdered sauce? Don’t get me wrong,” she adds. “I love that stuff. But there’s, like, actual cheese on the counter.”

“It’s very easy to make from scratch, actually. This is really my mom’s recipe.”

Funny how easily that came out of my mouth. She’s not somebody I talk about ever, not if I can help it. “Trust me. If it was difficult, she wouldn’t have made it.”

She doesn’t say a word while I fill a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. “Is there anything I can help you with?” she asks in a soft voice.

“No—I mean, if we had blocks of cheese, I would ask you to grate them, but the pre-shredded stuff will be fine. Just don’t report me to any food influencers or whatever. I’d be crucified.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” I glance her way, and she grins. “You don’t talk about your mom. I’ve been curious, but I figured you wouldn’t appreciate me asking.”

She’s not wrong. I kind of wish I’d never started this in the first place. But we’ve already shared a lot, even if I’m not sure that’s always a good thing. It can feel good to share. If anything, it takes more energy to avoid shit than to talk about it.

“There’s really not that much to say. She left when I was a kid.” I can only offer a half-hearted shrug. “She was always more interested in herself than she was in me or Dad.”

It’s only when she winces that it hits me. I could be describing her mom. She doesn’t say anything, though, only lowering her gaze and chewing her lip.

“I don’t think she ever wanted to be a mom,” I muse, going to the stove again to dump macaroni in the boiling water and stir it around. Once that’s done, I measure out my milk and add a couple of eggs before beating them together.

“Where is she now?” she asks.

“I don’t have a clue. But she probably did me a favor,” I conclude, and there’s no bitterness behind it. No anger. It’s the simple truth. “I’m probably better off. Dad did a pretty good job, or at least the best he could.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that. I mean, not like I knew her or anything, but I know how it feels to have a mom who probably should never have been a mom in the first place.”

The water starts to boil over, and I give it a stir. If anything, it’s a way to avoid her sad gaze. “Do you think that’s true? Really?”

“Oh, come on. We both know it is. I’m not looking for sympathy,” she’s quick to add before I can even think it. “But you see how she is. You know, the night in the pool, the night I told you about?” I look her way, nodding. “She pretty much brushed it off. I went home in tears and told her about it. I was shaking, I was crying, I even threw up.”

A whole range of emotions wash over her face, and all of them make me sad for her and pissed as fuck at Irene. Like I needed more reason to be. “She told me I was being dramatic.”

People say shit like this all the time, but I mean it. “I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

She looks appreciative when she smiles. “Thanks.”

It’s time to drain the pasta, which I do at the sink before tossing butter into the hot pan so it will melt. “She’s pretty hard on you, isn’t she?”

She barks out a laugh full of jaded bitterness. “Yeah, you could say that. Nothing’s ever good enough. I am not the daughter she pictured herself having. She wants somebody more like herself.”

A gold-digging whore with fake tits and an overly inflated self-worth? “I kind of got that feeling.”

“I’m nothing like her. I guess I don’t have to tell you that.”

I wouldn’t be going to all this trouble if she was anything like Irene. “I kind of got that feeling, too,” I reply with a smirk over my shoulder.

She watches me add the pasta back to the pan with the butter, then as I pour in the milk and eggs while stirring quickly to make sure nothing scrambles on the bottom of the pot. “You know what? You asked me about my mom.” As I start stirring in the cheese, I ask, “What about your dad? I’ve never heard anything about him. Do you see him ever?”

“I haven’t seen him since I was two years old.” There’s no emotion behind it. She’s just telling me a fact.

“Oh. Am I sorry to hear that, or am I glad to hear it?”

“I don’t really feel any way about it, personally.” But her sleeves are pulled down over her fists, and she looks like she’s trying to shrink into herself. That’s never a good sign. “I mean, he was gone before I turned two. I don’t remember him. I could walk past him every single day, and I would never know.”

As she talks about it, I can tell she’s gone over it in her head before. The way she just rattles off her thoughts without any emotion. “Of course...” Now I hear something leaking in. Disappointment, maybe, or sadness. “Mom spent more time than I even want to think about reminding me how happy they were before I came along and how he wouldn’t have left if it wasn’t for me.”

That bitch. “Jesus Christ.” The way I’m stirring this pasta, you would think it pissed me off. If only it was as easy as punishing a pot of macaroni. Like that could make up for everything Irene did to her.

“I know, right? Careful there,” she says when a few noodles jump out of the pot.

“God forbid she’d take any blame for herself,” I mutter, picturing Irene’s overly made-up face and scowling. “But come on. Knowing her, I can’t imagine how happy they really would’ve been.”

Elliana’s mouth falls open before a loud, almost joyful laugh fills the room. I can’t help but laugh with her, and it feels good to share the moment. It would’ve been nice if we could’ve been this honest with each other from the beginning, but there was too much standing in the way—mostly me. I took too much out on her. She was suffering, really going through pain, and I made it all about me.

“That’s it?” she asks when I stir in a little sriracha, salt, and pepper. “It’s that simple? I thought you were supposed to bake it.”

“You can, but not this recipe. That’s the beauty of it. You just throw it together and stuff your face.” Handing her a fork, I invite her to take a taste, and find myself watching closely as she samples it. When a bright smile blooms as she chews, I know I did a good job.

“What do you think? Should we watch *Iron Man 2*?” Pulling a couple of bowls from the cabinet, I shrug. “It seemed like you were into the first one.”

I can’t believe what it does to me when her eyes light up, and she nods enthusiastically. “Yeah! I want to see what happens next. But is that really the one we should watch first? Isn’t there another movie that got released between them?”

“I didn’t know you were so interested.”

She snickers, spooning macaroni into her bowl. “I might have looked it up, okay? Sue me. I want to do things the right way.”

“There really isn’t a right way, if you ask me. We can watch the second movie.” I’m just glad she wants to watch in the first place. I haven’t found a girl yet who gave a shit about that kind of thing. Not that it’s my reason for living or anything, but it is one of my interests, and Elliana taught me something: I like sharing my interests with people who get it. She gets it. The last person I would ever expect to take an interest in anything I care about.

But then, so much of her has gone beyond my expectations. I was wrong about so many things.

Yet she still wants to sit with me in the living room, our feet on the coffee table, bowls in our laps when the movie starts. I can’t pretend to pay a lot of attention to the action on screen—besides, I’ve seen it before. I’m more into her reaction. I can’t stop watching her from the corner of my eye

and remembering what I thought about her when Irene first brought her here.

I would never in a million years imagine sitting here with her, eating something I made, hanging out like we're friends.

We're more than friends.

I don't know how she feels about that, but it's pretty damn obvious there's more to this than either of us wants to admit out loud. I can't stop thinking about everything she's been through, how lonely she must've been—especially when she couldn't even rely on her own mother to give her a little comfort. She has been on her own for so long. I don't know what to do with this feeling of wanting to give her the things she's missed out on. I never knew how easy I had it until I met her. I never really gave much thought to what other people struggled with.

We're going to have to watch it again, or at least the last half hour, since she's out cold. Must've been all the carbs, or maybe it's just being exhausted by everything I've put her through lately. I can't imagine she's been sleeping super well, probably dreading when she would have to show her face in public again.

That's why, instead of waking her up and teasing her about not being able to make it through a whole movie this early in the evening, I quietly clean up after us, then turn off the TV when the movie's over. She's still asleep, curled up with her head against the cushions and her feet tucked under her. It's nice seeing her so peaceful.

Once I slide my arms under her, she mumbles softly. Her eyes open maybe a millimeter, and she mumbles again, but instead of telling me to get off her, she cuddles up against me with her head on my shoulder by the time we're on our way to the stairs. It feels much too good, taking care of her. Even something as simple as making Mom's macaroni and cheese is almost enough to make me proud.

Carrying her up the stairs, putting her in bed, it makes me feel warm inside. Like I'm doing something right.

And it's a feeling I want to last, which is why, instead of leaving her on her own, I crawl into bed with her, inhaling the scent of her shampoo when I settle in with my nose close to her hair. So many years she's been alone. I need her to know she doesn't have to be alone anymore. If she wants me to, I'll be here for her.

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TWENTY-SIX

Elliana

THERE IS something weighing on me. Something heavy, something warm. Something that is snoring softly by the time I start to return to consciousness.

What the hell happened last night? I vaguely remember knowing I was going to fall asleep—as much as I liked the movie, there was the very real fact that I didn’t sleep much the past couple of nights.

And part of the reason is now wrapped around me. Did Carter spend the whole night in my bed?

On the one hand, it’s sort of nice. It reminds me of a puppy I had when I was little. How he would always find a way to snuggle up against me in bed. *You can’t sleep with that dog in your bed, he’s filthy.* Yet another example of Mom’s loving guidance. It didn’t matter that I was happy.

I think I might be happy right now. I wish I knew how to feel about that. Maybe I need to stop worrying about how to feel and just... feel.

Then again, what am I talking about? This is still my stepbrother. There is nothing normal about any of this. And it would be dangerous to let myself think anything different, no matter how much I’m enjoying something as simple as sharing my bed with no threats, no pressure.

Until the thought of pressure makes my eyes fly open wide. “Carter. Get up!” Sure enough, a glance at the clock tells me what I already figured out. “We are so late!”

I finally have to shove him off me when he doesn't move fast enough. "Come on!" I shout as I jump out of bed.

"Breathe," he tells me, even laughing a little—until he sees the time and finally starts hauling ass. "Jesus, is it really that late already?"

"No, I changed the clock to screw with your head." At least I took a shower last night. One less thing to worry about this morning as I race through throwing on clothes at random. That's one positive thing about basically having a uniform I wear every day. I don't have to waste time thinking about what to put on.

Carter, on the other hand, runs across the hall to his room, cursing the whole way. There's a lot of fumbling around going on, along with a lot of banging and slamming.

"My ass is already in a sling," he shouts before slamming what sounds like a dresser drawer. "Kingsley is going to be watching my every move, at least until Dad gets back."

I almost wish he wouldn't mention what happened yesterday. Nobody forced him to fight those guys—except for the guys themselves, who I have no doubt were asking for it. That doesn't help me feel any less guilty for being the reason behind it.

Stop. You are not the reason. The voice in my head sounds a lot like Maya right now: sharp, to the point, and very annoyed. *You didn't do any of this. It's not your fault.*

I really wish it was easier to remember that.

We're out of the house in record time, skipping breakfast, jumping into Carter's truck, and almost tearing down the driveway and out onto the street. "It'll be fine," I decide as the engine roars. "Nobody's going to care if we're a few minutes late for class. I don't think we could get in trouble for that from the administration."

"If anything, it gives people less time to give me shit," he muses, leaning on the horn when the driver in front of us doesn't take a left turn fast enough. "Everybody will be too busy taking notes and whatever."

When I laugh softly, I catch him looking at me from the corner of his eye. "What's so funny?"

"I just never would've imagined you going through the same kind of thing I do," I admit. "I can't tell you how many times I've said that same thing to myself. The less time I hang around before class, the less time people have to screw around with me."

“Nobody’s going to screw around with you now.” He sounds grim, determined, and I wonder which of us he’s trying to convince. His jaw tightens before he adds, “After yesterday? Everybody’s going to think twice.”

I hope so, and for once, it’s not only for my sake. I should not feel protective of him, not after what he’s done. Not when so much of my trouble is thanks to him. But I can’t help hoping he doesn’t get into worse trouble than he’s already in. I hate to think of people trying to lure him into fights over me.

Even if my pulse flutters a little when I imagine it. And not because I’m worried or afraid.

But to think he’s ready to fight for me if it comes to it. Nobody has ever fought for me. Maybe that’s why it was so easy to sleep peacefully with him last night. Maybe that’s why I was able to forgive him yesterday.

He fought for me when nobody else would. Especially not my own mother.

There’s not much time to think about that, considering how fast Carter drives to school. He takes the turn into the parking lot fast enough that I grab onto the door handle for dear life. I can almost taste my own heart when I gasp. “Wow! Let’s try to make it to class alive.”

“I got us here, didn’t I?” He even manages to find a decent spot that won’t require too much running across the lot. He’s barely got the truck in park before I unbuckle my belt and open the door.

“Wait a second.” His voice is sharp enough to keep me in my seat. I turn to him a split second before he takes my face in his hands and covers my mouth with his.

The surprise takes my breath away, just as much as the sensation of his lips on mine. There’s passion behind it, and desire, and I don’t know how to feel or what to think. It’s nice—almost too nice, and that’s what scares me a little.

But in a good way. Like I’m about to get on a roller coaster.

He even makes it a point to trot beside me as we hurry to class. Like he’s making a point, ensuring everybody knows he’s protecting me now. I’m overwhelmed and, as long as I’m being honest with myself, a little uncomfortable at the attention he brings. Nobody says anything for once, but I feel their curiosity. Their judgmental stares.

If there's one thing I've learned how to deal with, it's people staring at me.

But usually when they do, I'm all alone. I'm not alone now.

"I'll see you later," he says when he drops me off. "Wait here for me, and I'll meet up with you." I don't have time to ask him if he's for real before he jogs off.

My head is spinning, and my heart is fluttering, and I really hope this isn't all for show. I mean, even if it is, he's helping me. Nobody is going to mess with me while he's around.

But I realize once I slide into the closest seat to the door that I kind of hope he's for real. More than kind of.

And when I leave the classroom and find him coming my way down the hall, I smile before I can help myself. I wish he didn't look so much like my savior.

It's a thought that stays with me the rest of the day as Carter chaperones me from one class to another. He hovers almost protectively once we reach the cafeteria, where we have lunch with the usual group of people. They all seem ready to forget what happened earlier this week—at least, they don't mention it when we sit down with them and attack our food.

"Thank god," Carter groans after sinking his teeth into an Italian sub. "We were in too much of a rush to have breakfast this morning."

"Were we?" Wren arches an eyebrow at me, thanks to his choice of words.

"Yeah, we stayed up late, watching movies," I explain. I shudder to think of the reaction we would get if everybody knew we slept together in the literal sense. After everything that went down this week? I would basically lose all credibility with the girls, who must still expect me to hate him. At least he doesn't add anything to the story. He's too busy scarfing down his sandwich, thank god.

To change the subject, I ask, "Have you girls ever watched the *Iron Man* movies? I really like them."

"Oh, you've got her watching them with you?" Tucker almost looks jealous. "I can't get Maya into any of the Marvel movies."

"Next thing you know, you'll be telling us you like watching football," Maya jokes.

I can only shrug, wincing. "I actually do."

For once, when everybody laughs, they're not laughing at me. They're laughing with me. I can laugh, too, and it feels amazing. I could get used to it.

I'm still thinking about it later in the day, after my last class. It's completely foreign and probably dangerous as hell, but I almost feel hopeful when I spot Carter coming my way. "Ready to go home?" I ask. For once, I don't dread it. Yet another miracle.

"Actually, no," he replies with a frown.

There goes my heart, sinking as usual. "Oh." He always has to keep me on my toes, doesn't he? "I guess I could get an Uber, unless you think you could drop me off."

His laughter is gentle. Not the snide, nasty laughter I'm so used to hearing from him and everybody else in my life. "I was thinking maybe we could get an early dinner. I know it's not even five o'clock, but I don't think I feel like eating macaroni and cheese again tonight, and it's all I know how to cook."

Something about his simple earnestness makes me laugh along with him. "Yeah, that would be nice. Even though I loved that mac and cheese." It was surprisingly good.

Walking next to me out of the building, he jokes, "Yeah, you loved it so much you went into a carb coma. I guess I wouldn't make a very good chef. All of my customers would fall asleep at the table."

Why can't he always be like this? He's in a good mood, he's charming, he's just a normal person. There's no anger or resentment, no acting like a big, bad man, so I'll be afraid of him or intimidated by him.

He's just... Carter. And I like Carter.

Maybe I need to have my head examined or something.

"What's so funny?" he asks once he joins me in the truck.

I didn't even realize I was grinning. "Nothing. I guess I'm just in a good mood."

The way he smiles at that makes my mood even better. Jesus, what is happening here? How did things change so quickly?

All I know is, it's not long before I'm sitting across from him at a table in the middle of the same Mexican restaurant where we had lunch with Mom and Paul before they left on their weekend trip. Before the fateful party. The night everything changed.

“Amazing,” I muse, dragging a chip through a bowl of fresh salsa. “It’s so much easier to enjoy the food when I’m not biting my tongue off. Mom really loves her margaritas.”

“And she makes it everybody else’s problem.” Something about the way he says it makes me laugh, and that’s refreshing after spending so many years being embarrassed by her. Having to hold everything inside, silently withering.

When I look up from the salsa, I can’t help noticing the way his attention has drifted over to a table close to where we’re sitting. I follow the direction of his gaze out of curiosity more than anything else and wish I hadn’t when I see a pair of girls giggling over their guacamole. They’re around our age from the looks of it.

Their shiny, blond blowouts make me touch a hand to my own hair. It looked pretty the day of the wedding, but it also took a ton of work from the stylist. Do other girls wake up at four in the morning to have enough time to look that nice? I literally can’t imagine putting that much work into it.

But when I see the way Carter watches them, it’s enough to make me wonder. Maybe the work would be worth it.

With a frustrated sigh, I roll up my sleeves again since they’ve already fallen down to my wrists and are getting in the way of me demolishing the salsa. I can’t help but glance over at those girls again. Their cute sundresses are basically the opposite of what I’m wrapped up in. They don’t have to worry about their sleeves dragging in a bowl. They’re probably not as warm as I am, either. I can’t blame it all on the spicy peppers.

“You okay?” Carter must have noticed me noticing them. He looks curious, but also a little concerned. I’m not used to people being concerned about me. It’s a little unnerving.

“Oh, sure. I’m fine.” I’m just sweating my ass off, that’s all. No biggie.

“I’ve gotta ask. Only because you seem pretty uncomfortable right now.” He reaches over the table to tug on my sleeve. “Why do you feel like you have to cover up so much? You must be dying in this thing.”

“I’m used to it.” And that’s true. I don’t really think about it anymore. At least, I only think about it when I’m in a situation like this. Comparing myself to the other girls, wishing I could have their confidence.

“You know, I am nobody’s idea of a wise leader or whatever.” He waves a tortilla chip, scoffing. “But I did hear something a long time ago that’s stuck with me. I think it kind of applies here.”

“I am all ears.” It’s not all the time he gets this serious.

“If you sit in shit long enough, you won’t be able to smell it after a while.” He shrugs a shoulder. “I know, it’s not poetry. But do you get what I mean? Just because you’re used to something doesn’t mean it’s good. You deserve to be comfortable and feel good about yourself.”

“I don’t like talking about this.” I can feel my walls going up, and the prickly sensation I was already wrestling with now covers my whole body.

“I hear you. I’m just saying, though,” he adds, “if you ever felt like you needed to protect yourself with all those clothes, you don’t have to continue. You’ve got me now. I’ll be your bulldog.”

When he snaps his jaw and growls, a giggle bursts out of me before I can help it.

Can he honestly mean that? Does he really want to protect me? I still have a hard time believing he actually cares. There is so much distrust still, and it’s not completely his fault. I know I shouldn’t carry the past with me, but I can’t help it. Old habits die very hard.

Carter has his faults, but he’s not one of those people who made it their life’s mission to humiliate me. He’s not them. It’s going to take time, but... “I want to let go of all the past stuff that’s been holding me back. I really do.”

When he smiles, it’s like the sun breaking through storm clouds, lighting up everything that was so dark only minutes ago. It transforms his face and leaves me with an ache. Longing. *More, I want more of this.* I want it so much, I could cry.

Of course, he’s unaware of the mess going on in my head. “Good. That’s the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

I’m so afraid to believe he means that. I can’t believe how much I want him to be sincere. The desire grips me, like a fist clenching my stomach tight. Or maybe it’s my heart that’s being clenched. A scary thought, but a very real feeling.

It’s a feeling that lingers once we’re home, full of chips and salsa, burritos, guacamole. “I think I gained ten pounds.” Carter groans before patting his stomach on our way into the house. “No regrets.”

“I was afraid they were going to ask us to leave before we cleaned the place out.” I didn’t touch a drop of alcohol tonight, but I’m buzzing, anyway. High off the energy between us. Buzzing over the idea of shedding

some of the past. I'm not sure exactly how, and I know it won't happen overnight, but I'm starting to believe it's possible.

I don't need to carry the past around with me—it's so heavy, dragging me down all the time. Maybe it's easier to imagine this with Mom being halfway around the world. She's not around to remind me of all the things I hate about myself, which, of course, is the same stuff she can't stand about me.

"All I know is, I'm going to sleep like the dead tonight." He follows me up the stairs, and I can't help it when my heart takes off faster. What is he thinking? Is he going to make it a habit, sleeping in my bed?

Am I unhappy about the idea?

No, I'm not, and that is more confusing than I have the bandwidth to handle tonight. There are still a lot of things up in the air, like what's going to happen when our parents come home and whether he's going to get in serious trouble for that fight.

But tonight, full of delicious food and feeling the closest to happy I've been in so long, I don't want to think about any of that. Just like I don't want to think about whether it's a good idea for him to share my bed.

That's why I don't bother putting up a front when he wanders into my room instead of going to his own. "I'll be a good boy," he promises before I even think to ask. "I ate half my weight in tacos tonight. You don't have anything to worry about except getting Dutch ovened."

"Oh, gross." I roll my eyes and gag. "You're definitely selling the experience."

Holding up his hands, he says, "I won't pin you under the blanket... but I can't make any promises about what'll come out of me while I'm asleep."

I should tell him to get lost, shouldn't I? I don't have the heart. And really, I don't want to. Not when it's so much better to crawl into bed after pulling my pajamas on and brushing my teeth. Not when it feels so natural, him bringing in his laptop so we can watch a movie together. And not when he wraps his arms around me. That's all he does—it's simple, sort of innocent, and neither of us says a word about it. We don't have to.

If anything, talking would only ruin it. I would much rather lie here with my head on his chest than talk, anyway.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Carter

“THANKS, MAN. THIS WILL WORK GREAT.” After taking a look at the contents of the baggie Kellan gave me, I tuck it into my pocket. “How much?”

“Like I would charge you,” he replies, grunting like I insulted him. “And don’t worry. It’s not as strong as that shit you smoked at my place. It’ll just be a nice, chill body high.”

That’s what I’m looking for. Not that anything is bad right now—really, things are going pretty well. This is the start of our second week without parents in the house, and it’s going better than I could have hoped—if I had any hopes in the first place.

We spent the weekend hanging out around the house, not doing much of anything, and it was surprisingly fun. Watching movies, sitting out by the pool. Elliana still won’t stick a toe in the water, but she sat reading under an umbrella while I swam. We just... coexisted, but without any negativity or fighting.

Kind of crazy, but I would like more of that. A lot more.

When he sees Elliana coming our way from across the parking lot, Kellan gives me a fist bump before going to his car. Meanwhile, I wait for her, leaning against the truck, and right away, it’s dead obvious there’s something wrong.

Maybe it's the way her neck has pretty much disappeared, since her shoulders are up around her ears and her chin is tucked close to her chest. Great. Things were going well, too.

"Hey. How was class?" I ask once she's close enough that I don't have to shout.

"Fine, I guess." She won't look at me. She only stares down at the ground until I open her door so she can escape inside the truck and hug her backpack.

I strongly consider murder as I round the truck to get behind the wheel. Somebody's still fucking with her. What the hell is wrong with these assholes? What do I have to do to make them leave her alone?

I can't. That's the problem. It weighs on me as I drive home with her sitting silent, basically hiding behind her hair. I can't fight her battles, no matter how much I wish I could. I can't be with her constantly. There are things she has to do on her own.

But how is she supposed to find the balls to do it when, every time she starts feeling even a little confident, somebody has to smack her down?

"Do you wanna get some pizza tonight?" I don't really want pizza, but I know she likes it. One of the things I've found out about her this past week. Turns out, once I took the time to get to know her a little, I found out we have things in common.

I mean, not like pizza is anything revolutionary or whatever—plenty of people like pizza. But at least it's something we can agree on.

"I'm not really hungry." She's barely moving her mouth to speak, just mumbling.

"Maybe not this minute, but you probably will be, eventually."

"It's fine." She almost spits it at me before going back to being silent.

I have to try. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do you want to talk about it?" she snaps back before sniffling softly, and I swear to God, I'm going to crack my teeth if I have to grind them any harder. Whoever they are, I hope they suffer for making her suffer.

"Okay," I mutter. "Just thought I would ask."

"I just don't get it." There's real rage in her voice. "What do people get out of being cruel? Like, why? What for?"

"I don't know."

"Oh? You don't know?" When I shoot her a look once we stop at a light, she turns her face toward her window. "Sorry. I shouldn't take it out on

you.”

Like I’ve never taken shit out on her. “Whatever. I get it.”

“Do you, though?” she asks. “Because I don’t think you do. I don’t think you could, because you’re Mr. Popular. Everybody knows you, people actually like you. They want to be around you.”

“Knowing who I am and wanting to be around me aren’t the same thing.”

“Please,” she groans. “Don’t act like you’re going to relate to me, because you can’t. You don’t know how it is, not really. Consider yourself lucky.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” I ask, which only makes her heave a sigh. We’re pulling down our street, coming up to the house. She’s a captive audience now, but she’ll probably run off as soon as we get inside.

I almost wish I didn’t have her bedroom door fixed over the weekend—before Dad could find out I kicked it in—now she can lock herself in again.

That’s not going to get her anywhere. I’m not exactly the best person to give advice on, well, anything, but I have to try to shake her out of this misery she’s in. It felt like she was finally taking steps in the right direction. And all it took was one asshole with a big mouth to ruin all of it.

“So, what? We’re back to this now?” I ask. “Hiding from the world because some people are assholes?” Once I pull to a stop, she reaches for the door handle rather than actually answering me. I’m faster, engaging the child locks before she can escape.

“Seriously?” she snaps when she hears the click. Still, she tries to open it, anyway, even shoving her arm against the door as she pulls the handle.

“Do you think you’re going to break your way out?” I ask. She only stomps a foot and grunts out her frustration like a kid throwing a tantrum. “I don’t want to go back to you sneaking around like a ghost, afraid somebody’s going to notice you. I’m not going to sit back and let you lose progress.”

“Oh, you’re my therapist now?” She covers her face with her hands, and I hate to see her this way, I do, but life is never going to get better for her unless she works on it a little. It fucking sucks that’s how it is.

“I’m somebody who gives a shit.”

“Well, it’s really nice of you to decide to give a shit when you’re in the right mood, but this is my actual life. And no offense, or maybe full

offense,” she adds with a smirk, “but a bunch of Instagram quotes and positivity aren’t going to help.”

“Fuck off. Instagram quotes?”

“That would be the thing you care about,” she mutters, rubbing her temples. “I’m not in the mood for this. I’ve had a shit day, and I just want to—”

“Run away? Like always?”

Throwing her hands into the air, she shouts loud enough to make my ears ring in the closed truck. “Oh my god! Why are you doing this to me? Why can’t you just leave me alone so I can process things on my own?”

“Maybe because you don’t really process anything. You’re stuck in the past all the time. You’re back in high school, surrounded by a bunch of assholes who I hope will eat shit and die. All I’m asking is for you to actually try to find ways to handle this shit. That’s it. Just try.”

“Why do you care?” Her dark, wounded eyes turn my way. I’m pretty sure they’re going to burn holes in me. The anger and resentment written all over her face make me feel small, because I’m responsible for some of it.

And that’s why I reply, “Because I’m tired of you seeing yourself as a victim when you don’t have to be. And honestly, I can’t be with you 24/7. So you need to get a little more confident and stick up for yourself. That, I can help you do. Will you let me?”

At least she doesn’t shut me down right away. “What do you plan on doing?” she asks after a long, silent few minutes.

I already have an answer for that one. It’s the most obvious choice. “I’m gonna unlock the door, and we’re going to the backyard.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” she says in a shaky voice.

“I didn’t ask you to like it. This is what has to happen. Step one of moving on with your life.” I release the locks, but, big surprise, she stays exactly where she is.

“I said I would help you, and I will,” I remind her. “You can’t be happy this way. I know you aren’t. So let’s do something about it.”

“I hate this,” she whispers, but she also gets out of the truck and follows me around the outside of the house, stepping through the back gate and closing it behind her.

“It just so happens I bought a couple of joints from Kellan.” The bag is still in my pocket and now I remove it, setting it on a table for Elliana to

stare down at, like I pulled a dead kitten from my pocket instead of some weed. “I’ll get a lighter from the kitchen. Be right back.”

“You want me to smoke these?” she calls out in horror while I’m on my way inside.

Jesus Christ, she’s determined to kill me. “Not both of them, and not on your own.” There’s a lighter in the junk drawer in the kitchen, just like I thought. I take it out there to where she’s still staring at the joints, though now she’s chewing her lip with her arms wrapped around herself.

“I’ve never done this before,” she confesses.

“I’m so shocked.” Taking one of the joints from the baggie, I can’t help but snicker. “I didn’t think you’d ever done this before. Kellan promised it’s a really nice, chill high. And the idea is for you to relax. That’s all you have to do right now. Relax. It’s just the two of us,” I remind her, since she still seems nervous.

But she hasn’t run screaming into the house, either. I move slowly, deliberately, demonstrating what she’s supposed to do. It’s the simplest thing in the world, but I can see how it would be overwhelming.

“You don’t have to hold it for long,” I explain on the exhale. “And it probably won’t take much for you to feel it. You should sit down.” Since all I need is for her to fall on her ass—or worse, on her face.

“You really think this will help me?” she asks, skeptical, but she sits down. This is progress.

“I really do, but you need to give it a chance.” After taking another hit from the joint, I pass it to her. “Don’t take a lot. Go slow. Tiny hits.”

She looks absolutely terrified but goes for it, and her face twists in discomfort before she coughs up a cloud of smoke.

“I said tiny hits!”

“I don’t know what that means,” she argues before coughing again. “Oh, that sucks.”

“Here. I’ll make it easier.” I crook a finger, inviting her to come closer, then take a hit, which I shotgun into her mouth. It’s hardly anything, but this time she takes it without coughing up a lung.

“That was better,” she agrees. “When will I feel it?”

“I’ll give you one more, then go inside and get you some water. You’re going to need it,” I warn before taking a hit and leaning in, touching my lips to hers and blowing smoke into her mouth. There’s something really

intimate about it, but something tells me she's too busy trying to handle things to think about anything else.

After bringing out water, I sit back in the lounge chair next to hers. "This is much better than what I smoked at Kellan's," I tell her with a satisfied groan.

"I think I'm feeling something. I mean... warm and loose all over."

"That's good. That's how you're supposed to feel."

"I like it." She's even smiling when she tilts her head back so the late afternoon sun can hit her face. I wish everybody could see her the way I'm starting to see her. There's more to her than what she shows the world.

Her eyes open, and she turns her head my way. "So, was this the plan? Getting me high, forcing me to relax?"

She's almost got it.

"Close. I think it's time you conquer what's been holding you back. That means showing yourself you're strong enough to face your shit and proving to yourself you can get through it. You don't have to let it rule you."

Slowly, she turns her head to look at the pool. "I'm a little fucked up right now, but I think I know why we're out here."

"I'm right here with you. We can go in the shallow end," I suggest. "It's, like, four feet when you first step in down there. You could stay with your feet flat on the bottom and the water won't be anywhere near your head."

"I really don't like this idea."

"Only because people have only ever been assholes to you when you're in a pool," I reply. Is that true? I'm not a doctor, I don't know. But it sounds good. "I want you to feel better, and I want to help you. Let's try, at least. If it's too scary, we can stop, but at least try."

When she still sits there, silent, keeping me waiting, something inside me hardens. "Or you can let those fuckers ruin your life. It's up to you."

"Okay, okay, enough with the psychology stuff." With a heavy sigh, she kicks off her sneakers. "Let's get it over with before I lose my nerve."

Not exactly positive, but I'll take it.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Elliana

I HATE THIS. I hate him, and I hate this. Even with the weed helping me feel looser, I want to scream. How do I let him talk me into things?

“I don’t have a bathing suit.” It seems pretty obvious, but I feel like I need to remind him.

“What’s wrong with your underwear? Or you could just take it off and skinny dip.” His eyebrows wiggle up and down.

Is this the paranoia I’ve always heard about when it comes to smoking weed? Because the idea of being out here, naked, shoves my heart up into my throat. “I don’t think so.”

And really, I don’t know if I could get my underwear off without falling over. I’m too unsteady, fumbling with the simple act of pulling my sweater over my head. I guess it’s not so bad being out here in a bra and panties—I’m still more covered than some girls are in their bathing suits.

Suddenly, the pool looks a lot bigger than it did before. I slow down, taking my time now, since I’m not in any hurry to get in the water. I can hear them in my head, all of them, along with the splashing as I struggled. Why do I want to do this now?

“Stalling for time?” As usual, the smug bastard doesn’t bother hiding his smugness. He stands at the end of the pool, already stripped down to his tight boxer briefs. Heat uncoils in my core and starts to spread—this is not the time for that. It must be the weed.

“Just give me a minute, please? Sorry if I can’t let go of my fears just like that, just because you think I should.” When I reach him, I snap my fingers in front of his face. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Fine. Pretend you weren’t deliberately taking your time because you’re scared.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

It feels good to say it out loud instead of only thinking it. When he laughs, I wish I had said it before now.

“Okay, now that you’re finally ready...” His gaze flicks over me, and his nostrils flare, and I can’t decide if I want to cover myself up or beg him to touch me. I think I smoked too much. “All we’re going to do is start off here, in the shallow end. You don’t have anything to worry about—I am not going to hurt you. You’re perfectly, totally safe.”

“It’s really easy to say that,” I murmur, looking down at the pool. Other people make it look so easy, don’t they? Why does everything have to be so damn hard for me?

“You’ll see it’s true once you’re in the water.” There are a few steps in the corner, which he now takes, holding onto a metal railing as he does. “You can hold on to this,” he reminds me. “That way, you don’t even have to worry about losing your balance or slipping. Couldn’t be any safer.”

“Sure it could be. I could stay here, safe and dry.”

“What’s the fun in that?” He still doesn’t seem to get it. Once he’s in the water, though, I see it doesn’t even come up to his chest. He holds out his hands. “I’ll stay here by the side so you can hold on to the edge. But you have to try. At least you can say you tried.”

I really wish he didn’t make sense. “Okay, fine.”

Really, there’s nothing to be all that worried about, right? All I have to do is hold on to the railing and take one step down at a time. The water is cold, but it feels good after spending all day with jeans covering my legs.

“See? You’re doing it.”

“Don’t patronize me,” I whisper, taking another step.

“Damn, you are impossible.”

“Shut up. Just let me get through this.” By the time I reach the bottom of the steps, the water is at my waist. He’s a little further away, so it comes up higher on him. “I think I’m comfortable here right now.”

“We have all day. There is no rush.”

He can't actually care as much as he seems to. I literally cannot imagine why he would. Yet when I look at him, almost frozen by dread, he's smiling. He's really smiling, almost beaming.

"What?" I finally ask as my heart tries to burst out of my chest.

"I'm proud of you."

"You don't have to go overboard." My face feels hot even though the water is so cool. Refreshing, really. I reach out to take hold of the concrete lip running around the pool and dash. It helps a lot. I could hop right out if I wanted to. I'm not trapped.

"News flash." He's grinning when he says, "I'm not going overboard. I really am proud of you. It's not easy to face your fears, but you're doing it."

I'm still not convinced. "You're just feeling smug because you talked me into doing this."

"One of these days, you're going to give me credit for something." Whatever he says. I'm too busy convincing myself to stay in the pool to argue with him anymore.

"Well, I did it. I got in the water. Can I get out now?"

"You know you can't. Let's go a little further." When he holds out his hand, I recoil before I can stop myself. "Seriously? Elliana..."

"This is a lot. You're asking me to do a lot, all at once!"

"I am not going to hurt you." He enunciates every word slowly, clearly, and I'm starting to see the temptation to drown another person because he is very drownable right now. "I'm trying to help you get over this and figure out how strong you are. That's all it's about. Now, for God's sake, take my fucking hand, and let's go a little deeper. Just a little bit, and you can hold on to the wall the whole time if it makes you feel better."

With a heavy sigh, I reach out and take his hand. "Happy?" I mutter before gasping when the water rises the further I walk with him.

"You're okay," he reminds me with a light laugh. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, once you get used to it."

"Wow. It almost sounds like you agree with me. I'm not sure what to think."

"Please, stop talking," I whisper. I come to a stop once the water is over my boobs. "I don't wanna go any further. I just want to stay here."

"That works." He folds his arms on the edge of the pool, facing the patio. "Try this. Do what I'm doing." As I watch, he slowly lowers himself

into the water until his head is under the water for just a second before he comes back up.

“No way.”

“You can do it,” he tells me. “This is how kids learn how not to be afraid of the water. It’s how they build confidence.”

“Good for them. I’m not trying to overcome any more today. This is enough.”

“I still think it would be easier for you to get comfortable.”

And I think it would be easier for me to get through my life without him acting like he knows me so well. I settle for folding my arms on the edge, closing my eyes, feeling the water gently lap against my skin as Carter moves around. It’s sort of nice.

“This one time, I was in my friend’s pool,” he announces out of nowhere. “I had to pee really bad.”

“Oh, seriously?” Is he really going to tell me this story? “You peed in your friend’s pool?”

“No. I’m not an animal. I would never pee in somebody’s pool.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good.”

“I got out,” he explains, kicking slowly, almost lazily. I can’t help but notice the water droplets that land on his smooth back and shine in the sun. “And I started walking to the house. Only I waited too long, and I couldn’t hold it, so... I peed on the patio.”

“Oh, my god.”

“And then, when his mom noticed, she thought the dog did it.”

“And I guess you let her believe that,” I conclude, and he nods. “How old were you?”

“Maybe eight or nine.” I don’t think it’s the sun that has his cheeks flushed. He wears a sheepish grin when he adds, “As far as I know, they never figured it out.”

“Either that, or they always knew it was you, and you’re the kid who peed in their backyard that one time.”

“Oh, fuck,” he groans. “This is what I get for sharing a story.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t think you are, really.”

I shouldn’t, but I can’t help giggling. “You’re right. I’m not, really.”

“Finally, a little honesty.” He creeps a little closer, nudging me with his elbow. “I really am proud of you, you know. I mean it. You’re brave for

getting in the water like this.”

“I don’t feel very brave right now,” I have to admit. “I feel scared, and I hate that I feel scared.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being scared when the whole world has shoved fear down your throat your whole life.”

There’s a truth to what he says that slowly starts to sink into my bones. It started all the way back when I was little, and I never knew what to expect from Mom’s boyfriends or from Mom herself. She did a lot more partying back then, out with her friends, meeting guys and bringing them home. Trying to fill up the emptiness inside her.

I have known fear all my life. That has to eat away at a person, right? It has to change their DNA.

I don’t have to let it win—the fear. I might not have had any choice in how it ended up ruling my life, but I have a choice whether I want to let it keep ruling me.

“Maybe you should come a little closer,” I suggest, inching my way over to him. All of a sudden, so many things that seemed impossible look different. Like maybe there is a way I can take control, after all. “Just to see how I handle being so close to somebody else in the water.”

“Okay...”

I don’t know if he believes me, but it’s not my problem, is it?

“You have me feeling more comfortable.” And it’s the truth. More than that, I wouldn’t be doing this if he didn’t put the idea in my head that I’m strong enough. Nobody has ever gone out of their way like this for me. It makes me want to be closer to him. “But I don’t know. Maybe I need a little more protection.”

He doesn’t buy it—I can tell from the way he smirks—but do I care? I really don’t think I do. The warm, needy feeling in my core is adding to it. That has to be the weed.

“You definitely seem more comfortable.” His hand touches the small of my back, and I swear a bolt of electricity runs through me. I feel like my hair is standing on end. That’s how alive I am, awake.

The water flows over my skin, and I’m finally facing my fears. “Why are you shaking?” Carter asks in a soft voice, close to my ear. Even the touch of his breath on my skin makes me shiver. “You’re not still afraid, are you?”

“No.” And that’s the best part of all. I am not afraid. I don’t know what to do with this feeling, like there’s power or strength flowing through me. I got in the pool, and I’m still alive. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

Not even when he leans in with his gaze moving over my face like he’s never seen it before, like he wants to take in every detail. Not even when his warm breath hits my skin as I close my eyes, and he kisses me slowly. Softly.

It doesn’t matter how slow or soft it is. His kiss is a match that makes a fire burst to life and wakes up everything that was dark. I am actually standing in a pool, with Carter’s arms closing around me, and I’m not afraid. My heart is pounding, yes, but not because I’m scared.

It’s because of the way he’s getting hard. The way his hands cup my ass cheeks under the water while his tongue strokes mine until all I can do is moan helplessly. All his touch does is make me want more. I need to be closer. I need to feel him all over me.

With my back against the wall, he wraps my legs around him, holding me in place with his body. “Relax,” he whispers when I tremble. “Put your arms around my shoulders. Touch me, Elliana.”

Oh, yes. That’s what I want. My fingers dance through his hair while his fingers slide under my panties, pulling them to the side so he can make me moan into his mouth as the heat and the ache threaten to kill me. It’s just too much. I don’t know if I can stand it.

“Let me inside you.” His helpless whisper is like a drug stronger than what I smoked earlier, and it could be addictive, because I can see myself hearing him beg me like that forever.

I can only nod, breathing hard and fast, pulling him closer with my legs while he slides his hand between us to pull himself out of his shorts. Is this really happening? I went from being terrified of the water to letting Carter slide inside me, where it’s pulsing and throbbing for him. Where he stretches and fills me.

My mouth opens, and I’m about to gasp when he kisses me again, stifling the sound. He barely needs to move—I’m already so close, so alive, tingling all over. Every touch, every inch of him moving slowly inside me. “Look at you, bad girl,” he whispers. “Letting me fuck you like this out in the open. I bet you like it, don’t you?”

I do. Not just the feeling, but knowing how wrong it is. Taboo. There’s nobody else out here, but the threat is there, and it adds something to the

experience. I want to tell him that, but I don't get the chance before his mouth covers mine again, and he sweeps me up in more sensation than my body knows what to do with. I'm going to burst into flame—is that possible, being in the water? I feel like it is right now, like I'm going to set the water on fire. And it's all because of him.

He breaks the kiss, and I bury my face in his neck to muffle the moans I can't hold back. "So tight," he whispers, and now he's moving faster. The pace makes me hold on tighter and the water starts to splash. There's nothing I can do, nothing but hang on as I'm swept away.

"Oh, fuck," he groans in my ear, dragging out the sound, but I barely hear him over the hammering of my heart. Almost there... almost...

Pleasure ricochets through me and tears me apart once the tension breaks. I have to bite down on his shoulder to keep from screaming—I think he likes it, since he shudders and groans and barely pulls out in time to keep from coming inside me. "That was close," he grunts breathlessly, then laughs. "How do you feel about the pool now?"

Like I'll never be able to look at one again without remembering how he helped me get through my fear... and how hard I came while he did.

TWENTY-NINE

Carter

I DON'T NEED to go outside to know it's hot this morning. There's something about the way the sun is shining, with an almost hazy light that hangs in the air. It's not even nine, and it looks fucking miserable.

That's what makes me shake my head at Elliana when she walks into the kitchen for breakfast. "No way," I tell her, shaking my head again as she stops dead in her tracks.

"That's exactly how I want to be greeted when I come downstairs." She leaves her backpack on the floor by the table, giving me a funny look on her way to the fridge. "What's the problem this time?"

Eyeing her clothes, I explain, "You are going to die out there in that sweater. I'm not just saying it, either. It is hot as hell."

She only shrugs, glancing toward the window. "Is it? I mean, I can deal with a little heat."

"Well, there's a heat advisory today. Maybe you need to think about wearing something else."

"I'm not going to wear the slutty dresses Mom bought for me. Those are the only kind of clothes I have besides what I usually wear. Remember the dress I wore to the party?" When I nod, she says, "That's what I'm talking about. There's nothing normal. Nothing I could wear to school."

This is ridiculous. I can't believe I have to worry about what a grown woman wears outside the house. But she's so damn stubborn, I wouldn't put

it past her to end up dying of heat stroke or some shit, all to prove a point. I don't feel like carrying that on my conscience.

There's nothing happening today I can't miss, and that's probably the same for her. "Okay. I know what we have to do."

Her brows draw together when she frowns. "Why do I have a bad feeling?"

"Because you are a very suspicious person." I'm kidding, but it's also the truth. "I'm taking you out shopping. We can use my card. Well, Dad's card."

"Shopping?" Again with the skepticism. She arches an eyebrow and purses her lips, sizing me up. "For what?"

"Health insurance. What do you think I'm talking about?" Sometimes, I swear she plays dumb just to piss me off. And it's working, too. "For clothes. Clothes you can be comfortable in on hot days. You can't walk around like that all summer—do you really want to be miserable?"

"You don't need to do this." She wants to close herself off again. I see it. The shoulders are starting to go up.

"Stop yourself right now," I warn. It only takes a few long strides to round the island between us—it hits me there was a time she would have flinched away, scared of me, but not now. She stands her ground as I take her by the shoulders. Today's thick sweater is rough under my hands. Was she seriously going to go out in this? "It looks like we're just going to keep knocking down these barriers you put up. Yesterday, it was the pool. Today, it's your clothes. Tell me the truth. Are you really happy dressing this way?"

She wants to say yes. I see it written all over her face. She wishes she could tell me she likes dressing this way just to shut me up. She has to know I would never believe her. She's stubborn, not stupid. Lowering her gaze, she sighs. "I never really thought about it as happy or unhappy."

"Safe?" I guess, and she nods with another sigh. "You don't have to worry about that stuff anymore. There's nothing anybody can say to you that makes a damn bit of difference if you don't want it to. Right? You are strong, and you're worth more than that."

"Do you believe that?" She searches my face with those big, brown eyes, and I almost want to hide from the way they seem to stare through me. Do I believe it?

"Yes," I reply, nodding firmly. "I do believe it. And you're going to believe it, too, if it kills me."

“I just don’t get you sometimes.”

Yeah, that makes two of us. “We’re cutting school today.” She makes a sound that tells me she doesn’t agree, but I didn’t ask whether she agrees. “We’re going shopping, because you need clothes. End of story.”

“We can’t just cut school to go shopping.”

“Says who? I disagree. This is making sure you have what you need, and that’s important. And fuck anybody who wants to argue with me about it—including you.”

“Wow,” she whispers, snorting. “I had no idea it meant that much to you.”

That’s the thing. Neither did I.

It turns out there’s a lot of things that mean something to me, things I never thought about before. Almost like there’s part of me I didn’t know existed until she entered my life.

And when I think back on how much I didn’t want her around, it disgusts me. She’s not her mom, but I punished her, anyway. It feels like taking her shopping so she can be comfortable is the least I can do.

“I still don’t feel super comfortable with this. I don’t like attention—you should know that by now.” It’s like I told her we have to go to the electric chair today.

“I’ve never met a girl who didn’t want to go shopping.”

“Not all girls are the same,” she points out, making me drop my hands to my sides and sigh like she’s breaking my ass, because she is. “Have the girls you know been dragged around by their mom and picked apart the whole time?”

“Honestly? Probably. I’m not trying to tell you what you feel doesn’t matter, but I know you’re not the only girl who’s ever gone through that. Maybe you’ll like it better without your mom being around. You could actually enjoy it.”

“But won’t you be bored?”

“If you don’t stop trying to come up with reasons why we shouldn’t do this, I’m going to make you go swimming again—and in the deep end, this time.” She watches, smirking, as I crack my knuckles. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Okay, fine. Let’s go, I guess.” She still looks totally miserable. Maybe she’ll feel better once she gets started trying things on. There’s really

nothing wrong with her body—not even close. She's just afraid. And she's probably carrying a shit ton of negativity from Irene.

I hope you're having fun in Thailand, gold digger. Your daughter is here suffering in the meantime.

I have to force myself to stop thinking about her as we finish eating cereal. If I'm in a shit mood, the morning is ruined. "Let's go out now," I decide once the bowls are in the dishwasher. "This way, there won't be so many people around the stores."

"Stores? Plural?" The girl looks like she's ready to drop dead from fright, but she follows me out of the kitchen, dragging her feet. Just in case I forgot for even a second she's not looking forward to this. Sometimes being nice and taking interest in a person's life isn't worth the frustration.

But once I open the front door, it's obvious we're making the right choice. The heat hits me in the face and tries to suck the air out of my lungs.

"Damn," she murmurs. "All right, maybe it's better for me to find some new clothes."

Oh, you think? Maybe I'm finally growing up or learning self-control, since I keep that thought inside. With the air conditioner running at full blast, we pull out from the driveway, and I steer us toward the mall.

"All I'm saying is, don't expect miracles." She is so determined for this not to work. Glancing over, I find her staring out the window. "I don't look good in a lot of things. My body is all wrong."

Fuck you, Irene.

"Who made you think that? Because I've seen your body plenty of times, and it looks good to me." Good enough that I would like to see her in clothes that show her off a little more.

"Who do you think?" She blurts out a sad, empty laugh. "Then she buys me short dresses that barely cover my ass. Like, make up your mind, woman."

"She's not here now. She's on the other side of the world, and I like your body. A lot." Just thinking about it makes me reach over to close a hand around her knee and give it a squeeze.

I was right about coming out at this time of day. The parking lot is practically empty. Some of it might have to do with fewer people shopping in actual stores anymore, but I'm not in the mood to think about economic collapse or whatever it is. Not when there's work to do. "I know from

personal experience there's a lot of room on this card—and Dad would be happy to buy you whatever you want. So go as crazy as you want to go.”

“I don't want to go crazy at all.” She can say that all she wants, but the way she looks at the dresses on some of the mannequins in a store window tells a different story. She has told herself for so long that she can't be a certain way or want certain things that she's actually started to believe it. I see what's underneath all of that. The person who wants to come out but is still too scared.

“That would look good on you.” I have to keep it casual—I don't want her to know I was paying attention. It's like I'm hunting, and I can't scare her away. I have to take my time, choose my words carefully. I almost can't believe I'm going to all this trouble.

“You think so?” If she chews her lip much harder, she'll bite through it.

“Why don't you go try it on?” I even give her a slight shove toward the open doors to the store. “If you don't like it, fine, but you can try.”

“What if it's a waste of time?”

“So what?”

“What if I don't like it?”

“I'm sure I'll live through the disappointment.”

“But it'll be a waste of your time.”

I'm going to scream. Good thing there aren't many people around to hear me. “For fuck's sake, Elliana. It's my time. I decide if it's wasted. Try the damn dress on, or I'm going to buy it for you in the first size I see, and you'll have to wear it whether you want to or not.”

“Fine, fine,” she grumbles, finally going into the store just when I'm sure I'm going to strangle her. Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? Isn't she supposed to be dragging me from store to store?

Not like I'm her boyfriend or anything. I need to be careful, or else I could forget that part.

“I can wait right here,” I offer, dropping into a chair near the dressing room. “If you want my help picking things out, just let me know.” But something tells me she'll be better off on her own, without me making suggestions. I don't want to freak her out or put any pressure on her when she's already feeling pressured enough. I will offer an opinion if and when I'm asked for one, but that's it.

At first, she hesitates, and I almost want to ask if she's afraid of there being a test after this. It's supposed to be fun, and I can't think of a single

girl I know who wouldn't jump at the chance to wear out a piece of plastic they don't have to worry about paying off.

But pretty soon she loosens up, and before I know it, I've got dresses and skirts and shorts piling across my lap.

"Hang on. Let me find a shirt to go with that," she says, starting back to a wall full of shelves where T-shirts are stacked in probably every color possible. One of the sales clerks opens the dressing room so she can hang everything up in there for when Elliana is ready to start trying things on.

"You're really sure this is okay? I'm not saying I'm going to buy all of it," she says, chewing her lip again while the sales girl takes armfuls of clothing to the dressing room.

"Dad will be so glad when he sees you feeling comfortable with yourself. He'll probably ask why we didn't do this sooner." She seems relieved to hear that before ducking into the room waiting for her.

"I better get a fashion show out here," I call out, and the girls behind the register giggle. It wasn't that long ago I would've gone over to talk with them, maybe flirt, see how far I could get. Now I kind of wish they would go away, so it could be just the two of us here in the store.

"What do you think about this?" The door to Elliana's room opens, but instead of coming right out, she peeks from around it. "Please, be kind."

I would tell her I'm always kind, but that's not true, so I just wave her out. "Let's see."

The first thing out of my mouth when I see her in a skirt that comes down to the middle of her thighs and a T-shirt is, "What mirror are you using in there that makes you think you don't look great in this?"

"Oh, stop," she whispers, stepping in front of the three-way mirror outside the dressing rooms.

"I'm serious. Do they need to be cleaned or something?"

"You really think this is right? It's not showing too much leg or whatever?" She tugs at the hem, frowning at her reflection.

"That's kind of the point. But if you don't like it, you've got a hundred other things to try on."

"And you're not bored to death?"

Maybe not to death. It's not exactly the most fun I've ever had, but I'm not about to stop her. It was hard enough getting her out here in the first place. "Try on the next thing. Take your time."

“Whatever you say.” But I’m not blind. She is grinning on her way into the dressing room. And by the time she tries on another outfit, and another after that, she’s flat-out smiling.

I want to ask her if she feels better wearing clothes that are actually meant to be worn at this time of year, but that would only make her shut down. Besides, I can tell she does. I don’t have to rub it in her face to know I’m right, that she’s feeling happier already.

And me? I almost have to sit on my hands to keep from grabbing at her. Maybe I screwed myself over, now that I think about it. It’s going to be harder to keep my hands off her when I can see more of her.

It’s fine to touch her when our parents aren’t around, but what about later, after they’re home? I’m going to have a lot of dates with my right hand in my future.

Instead of thinking too much about that—we still have time, I don’t need to worry about it now—I give my final verdict on the clothes she’s not sure of.

“I think you should get all of it, because you look good in all of it.”

Her cheeks flush before she giggles. “You’re going overboard.”

Maybe, but does she look upset? Not at all. She deserves to have somebody flatter her. She deserves to feel special.

The way she’s beaming after we almost have to stumble out of the mall with bags in both hands, I would say she feels pretty damn good. “That was an insane amount of money!” She laughs like she still can’t believe it. “Are you sure your dad is okay with this?”

“It’ll be fine. You’re family. He wants you to be happy.” Irene will be happy, too. That will make up his mind, I think.

As soon as we’re outside, she gasps. “Are there any eggs frying on the pavement?”

“Hurry,” I grunt, using the key fob to turn on the truck so the air will be running by the time we reach it. As soon as we do, we load the bags into the back, then pretty much leap inside.

“Thank fuck—” I barely have the words out of my mouth when she leans over, takes my face in her hands, and delivers a kiss that immediately makes me hard.

“What was that for?” I grunt when she lets me go.

“For making me do that when I wouldn’t have done it myself.” She’s wearing a playful grin when she sits back, pulling on her seatbelt. “Maybe

I'll give you a little fashion show when we get back."

To think, I was going to ask if she wants to go to lunch. Fuck that. We're going straight home now. We could always order food if we're too worn out to make anything. And I plan on making sure we're both too worn out. She can't kiss me like that and not expect to have her brains fucked out.

"You're in a hurry!" She giggles when I basically throw my door open as soon as we're parked in front of the house.

"Are you kidding? It's amazing I managed to stay at the speed limit the whole way back." I wiggle my brows, then give her a growl that makes her laugh. "I'm looking forward to the fashion show you promised."

"I should've known..." She doesn't seem unhappy about it, though, as we get the bags together and head inside.

"You should try on that dress. The blue one," I suggest. The dress that almost made me drool on myself when I saw her in it. Just thinking about it makes my dick twitch again. "You should try it on right here in the living room. Don't even bother going upstairs."

"Wow. I always thought guys liked lingerie and stuff."

"We do, but it's nice to mix things up every once in a while, too." And she's wasting time. I'm ready to start pulling her clothes off instead of letting her take care of it herself. While she's getting changed, I go to the kitchen for water. If things go the way I'm thinking they will, we're both going to need it. I plan on making her scream.

"I'm ready," she calls out, making me slam the refrigerator door and almost run to the living room.

The dress fits her like it was made with her in mind. I forget how to talk when she does a slow turn to show off her plump, firm ass. The swells of her tits are exposed just enough to make me salivate, and her legs? My hands flex from the need to touch them, grab them, wrap them around me.

"You are dangerous," I tell her, crossing the room in a few long strides so I can set down the water and take her by the waist. "It's a miracle I didn't do this at the store."

She winds her arms around my neck when I kiss her—slow, deep, pulling one high-pitched moan after another from the back of her throat. She's alive in my arms, warm and firm and soft at the same time.

"You're so fucking hot." I pull my head back until she looks me in the eye. "I'm serious. And don't let anybody ever tell you different. Got it?"

“Got it.” She looks and sounds confused, but that’s fine. I have all the time in the world to wipe out that confusion.

Starting right now, when I turn her in place and bend her over the coffee table. “I love your legs,” I whisper as my hands run up them from her knees to her hips, sliding up under the dress until my thumbs trace where her panties meet her ass cheeks. The way she shivers and gasp gets me rigid, almost dripping already.

“What do you think? Should I fuck you right now?” I whisper, slowly easing her underwear over her ass. “Or should I eat your pussy first?”

“What would you rather do?” My heart almost stops when she wiggles her ass suggestively. Who is this girl? Where has she been hiding?

Under a heavy sweater, that’s where.

All of that sass melts into a high-pitched, needy moan when I find her wet, swollen slit. “I think I would rather taste all of this,” I decide, dragging my fingers through her silky heat.

At first, I don’t understand what happens next. The sound coming from the front entry hall. The door opening.

“We’re home early—” Dad comes around the corner, calling out like he didn’t expect to find us in here.

But that’s okay, because we didn’t expect him to come home early. We didn’t expect to be caught like this, with her bent over in front of me, and my fingers probing her pussy.

He stops dead, eyes bulging, his mouth falling open. “What the hell are you doing?” he bellows.

THIRTY

Elliana

I WANT TO DIE. I mean, I have wanted to die before—many times, more times than I want to think about—but now I really, really wish I would drop dead on the spot, so I don’t have to face any of this.

I stand up straight and yank my underwear back up with shaking hands before fixing my dress, but not fast enough that Mom didn’t see as she came up behind Paul. “What the fuck is happening here?” God, her voice is like nails on a chalkboard. I almost forgot how much I hate it while she was gone.

“What were you doing to her?” Paul storms across the room and wedges himself between us, facing Carter and almost snarling in his face. “What is wrong with you? Are you really so fucked in the head that you would pull something like this?”

“He didn’t—he’s not—” I’m trying, I really am, but it doesn’t seem like anybody’s all that interested in listening to me. Mom is beside herself, her face deep red as she yells incoherently and waves her arms.

My face is redder. In fact, my whole body is flushed in shame. They’re home five days early, with no warning. Of all the times for them to walk in. All I see in front of me is humiliation. Getting accused of all kinds of things, maybe being separated from him over this.

The idea chills my blood and makes my chest ache, but there are bigger problems right now.

Like the way Paul is screaming in Carter's face. "Well? Tell me what you were doing! Why did you have her like that?"

"My baby." Somehow, the worst part of all is the way Mom rushes to me and throws her arms around me like she genuinely cares. "What did he do to you? What was he going to make you do?"

"It's not like you think." Why bother? She can't hear me when she's too busy shouting at Paul to do something. What she expects him to do, I don't know.

"Would you just listen to me, please?" I beg. "I'm telling you, Mom! He wasn't making me do anything!"

"The way he didn't make you take those photos, you mean?"

Oh, my god. I'm going to throw up.

My legs are too weak to hold me up. I end up dropping onto the coffee table while bile rushes up my throat.

"Yeah. We know about the pictures." Paul's hands are level with my eyes, and I watch with a sinking heart as they curl into fists while he stares daggers at his son. "You left that part out, didn't you? Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"How could you? What are you, some kind of animal?" Mom gathers me in her arms again, which is pretty awkward from where I'm sitting. She ends up squashing my face against her stomach. "You're lucky I don't press charges against you for this." I have to wonder what makes her think she would succeed. The pictures were of me, and I'm not a minor. If I don't want to press charges, why should she?

Paul jabs a finger against Carter's chest. "The entire town is going to think my son is some sort of pervert. Congratulations. I hope you're proud of the reputation you're creating for yourself."

"What about Elliana's reputation? Oh, my baby." She even sniffls and her voice trembles. And yes, I am definitely going to be sick, because this is a farce. Since when does she care? I once told her I almost died, and she accused me of overreacting. I'm supposed to believe she means this now?

"Elliana." Paul turns toward me, and for the first time since he walked in, I can think about more than just myself and Carter. He looks absolutely mortified, sorrowful, heartbroken. Unlike Mom, I actually believe he means it. "I am so sorry for this. Of course, it came out after the fight. When those boys were questioned. The one whose jaw my son broke couldn't say anything." He glares at Carter, who stands stone-faced, silent. "But the

other one, who *only* had a broken nose, explained why they were bothering you in the first place. And this doesn't excuse them," he adds, throwing a bitter glare at Carter. "But it means being able to see the full picture, finally."

Turning back toward the still silent Carter, he jabs his chest again. "Did you think I wasn't going to find out about that? How could you do it? Taking pictures like that of your own stepsister! And then sending them out to everyone?"

"He didn't do that part." There's no life in my voice, though. I'm too humiliated, not to mention disappointed. We were supposed to have more time together. We never even talked about how to handle things when Mom and Paul are around. It's like getting ripped out of a nice dream and wishing more than anything to go back. It's never possible, though, is it? You can try all you want, squeeze your eyes shut, force yourself to fall asleep. It doesn't matter. The dream is over. And even though it makes no sense at all, I've been existing in a dream for days. A dream where Carter and I were happy, against all odds.

What is he thinking? How does he feel? I can't read his face. If I could only tell what he's feeling, I might be able to get a better grip on all of this. I wouldn't feel so alone. We might as well be on separate islands, with miles of ocean between us.

"I have never been this disappointed in you," Paul tells him. "I will never live this down, do you understand? My own son sent pictures of his stepsister to everyone in school, because he is cruel and childish. I can't even look at you."

"Neither can I," Mom agrees. "Neither should my daughter. Come on. I'm getting you out of here."

"Wait a second—" I start, but she only shakes her head as she pulls me to my feet.

"Get your purse. We're going now."

In a panic, I look over at Carter, but he won't look at me. There's nothing defiant about the way he stands there, *per se*, but I think I would rather he throw a fit than act like he's totally disconnected. He's totally checked out.

"Let's go." Mom practically shoves me out of the room—I have to stumble to catch myself before falling, then trot out through the front door and into the blazing heat outside.

“Unbelievable. Absolutely unforgivable.” Mom is still beside herself as she unlocks her BMW, which is hotter than the surface of the sun after sitting out in the driveway, closed up, and unused. Funny, but it hits me that I’d be much more uncomfortable if I wasn’t wearing my new dress.

“Mom, please, let me explain.” Only how am I supposed to explain this? Yes, I know what he did was wrong, but I sort of fell for him along the way and forgave him before I realized I was even doing it? Okay, that is actually pretty decent, but I really doubt she would understand. It’s not in her nature.

“Oh? You’re going to explain now? I should’ve known you would do this.”

And I should’ve known she would do this. I should know better. There shouldn’t be any surprise making my heart sink like it does. I shouldn’t be disappointed in her, because I shouldn’t expect anything except pure selfishness.

As soon as we are stopped at a light, her head snaps around so she can glare hatefully at me. “There I was, in the middle of paradise. On my honeymoon, Elliana! And I have to come home early because my daughter can’t help but act like a self-centered brat?”

“What? What did I do?”

“What you always do!” The light turns green and the driver behind us taps their horn, so she flips them off before jamming her foot on the gas pedal. “You managed to make it about you! This is supposed to be my time, and instead we had to rush home for you! Do you know what that’s like for me?”

“Do you even care about the pictures?” Why bother asking? Maybe I’m just tired of hearing her yelling at me without being able to say anything in response.

“I think you made it easy for him. Where else did he get the idea it was possible to photograph you that way? You think I don’t know you?” She asks with a bitter laugh, weaving in and out of traffic without bothering to use a signal. “Walking around like you wouldn’t say ‘boo’ to a ghost, but really thriving on the attention it brings you to stand out. Don’t lie to me. I’ve known you all your life. You’ll never change.”

Don’t listen. Don’t let her get to you. Right, I know I shouldn’t, but it’s a lot easier said than done. How can she hate me this much? How can she be so deluded about herself? Like I’m the problem. Like I’m the one who’s

always had to make everything about myself. It would be funny if it wasn't so baffling.

"I will tell you one thing." She pulls into the parking lot of a Best Western, the first hotel we've come to since leaving the house. "You are not going to ruin this for me. I finally found something good in my life. You will not break us up. Do you understand?"

"Who says I want to? I didn't want any of this! In fact," I babble as the car squeals to a stop in front of the entrance, "we were starting to work things out. I was handling it on my own. You're the one who came in like a tornado and blew everything apart."

"Oh, that's what I did? Because believe me," she fires back with a laugh. "I would much rather have stayed in Thailand than come home to deal with this bullshit drama. Now go."

"Go? Go where? What are you talking about?"

"Get the hell out of the car, go into that hotel, get a room, and stay there until I tell you to come home." With a huff, she opens her purse and grabs some cash from her wallet. She holds a few hundred dollar bills out in front of me. I stare at it, dumbfounded.

I'm pretty sure my brain just short-circuited. "Do you want me to just get out of the car? Where are you going?"

"I'm going home to be with my husband and support him!"

"But... But I don't have any clothes with me besides what I'm wearing. I figured we would spend the night or something. I don't have toiletries. I don't have anything in my purse."

"If you waste another minute of my time, Elliana, so help me. Get out of the car. I don't even want to look at you!" She's unhinged, screaming, and I feel the hatred in every word. She means it. She does not want to look at me. Well, the feeling is mutual. I snatch the money from my mother's hand and stuff it into my pocket.

Even though I don't have anything with me but my purse, I stride with as much dignity as I can into the hotel. I still have Paul's card from earlier. I guess I'll have to use that.

Because otherwise, I'm on my own. Just when I thought things were starting to look up. I should know better by now. I shouldn't even bother trying.

THIRTY-ONE

Carter

AS MUCH AS I hate to see her go, I'm glad. She doesn't need to be here for this.

Something about the clicking of the door unlocks the tension that's been holding me in place and keeping me quiet. "Now, will you listen to me for a minute?" I ask.

"What did you just say to me?" Dad snaps back, like I lapsed into another language. "Did you really have the audacity to tell me to listen to you for a minute? Like you have any place to tell me a damn thing? I don't wanna hear a word you have to say."

"You don't have the full story."

He throws his hands into the air, backing away while laughing bitterly. He got a nice tan in Thailand. It's a shame he didn't stay a little longer. "Oh, there's more to the story? Well, excuse me if I don't want to hear it, because what I know so far sickens me. Who are you? Who have I raised? Because I don't recognize you right now, Son," he concludes with heavy sorrow in his voice.

"Dad, I'm—"

He's still on a roll. "The Carter I thought I knew wouldn't take advantage of a girl like you took advantage of Elliana, much less his stepsister—and I don't give two solid fucks how you felt about her coming

here to live with us or becoming part of our family,” he adds. “So don’t even start with that shit, you devious, dishonest little prick.”

And there I was, thinking I was old enough to be beyond reacting to having my ass handed to me by my dad. I’m a grown man, right? Not a sniveling little child.

But I’ve never seen him like this. I’ve never heard him talk to me or anyone with so much hatred. When he tells me he doesn’t know who I am, I believe him. Because he’s looking at me like I’m a stranger.

And there’s only one thing I can say once he goes silent, except for his ragged breathing. “I know.”

“Oh, you know?” He really does not have any faith in me, judging by his brutal laughter. “So that’s how you’re going to defend yourself? By making me believe no matter what I say, it’s not any worse than the way you feel? Because that is not going to work.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do, Dad.” Fuck, I am so tired. I guess that’s what happens when your whole life gets flipped on its head out of nowhere, with no warning at all.

I’m tired enough that I have to sit down, so I do, nudging the shopping bags aside with my foot. We were having such a good day. It was going to get so much better.

“So, what are you trying to do?” he barks. “Because I shit you not, Son, I am about thirty seconds away from kicking your ass like it’s never been kicked. You think you hurt that kid you landed in the hospital? You have no idea.”

Staring down at my folded hands, I murmur, “I know what I did was wrong. And to be honest with you, I don’t know how I could’ve done it. I was stupid and selfish and cruel, but I’ve been doing everything I can think of to make it up to her. I’m serious,” I tell him when he scoffs. “I’ve been trying to help her.”

“By breaking someone’s jaw?”

“By convincing her to get into a pool for the first time since a bunch of kids tried to drown her back in high school,” I snap, because I’ve had enough of him making assumptions. I’m probably not doing myself any favors, but who cares at this point? Everything is already fucked. “Or did Irene never tell you about that? When Elliana came home one night in tears, hysterical, because she thought she was going to die? Ever since then, she’s been afraid—and not just of swimming. That’s why she dresses like she

does, that's why she acts like she's afraid all the time. But I got her in the pool."

His forehead creases. "She never told me about that."

Oh, big shock. I'm sure she doesn't even remember. "And do you see all this?" I wave a hand over the bags. "I took her shopping today, because she was going to go to school in one of those sweaters when it's over ninety degrees. I convinced her to get clothes she would feel more comfortable in. I want to help make her life easier and better than it's been."

"It's the least you can do," he mutters.

"I know. It is the very least I can do. And it's not like I think I've made up for anything, because I know I haven't. What I did, you can't make up for in a week. But I want to keep working on it," I conclude, making him stare me straight in the eye. It's the simplest, true thing I know.

His jaw is still tight and his eyes narrow when he folds his arms. "And how does she feel about this?"

"I mean, it was hard as hell to convince her to go shopping today—on your card," I add, because I don't want him getting on my ass about that, too. "I thought you wouldn't mind, because it means she's not going to get heat stroke in her clothes."

"Of course." He waves a hand. "Whatever she needs."

"She didn't want to do it, but she ended up having a good time. She was feeling really good about herself. She was happy. Have you seen her looking happy since she moved in?"

"This does not absolve you," he growls.

"I didn't think it would. I'm just saying, I'm working really hard on making up for what I did. There's no excuse. I can't defend myself. I can only try to make up for it, because I really want to."

He looks about as surprised as I feel. Hell, I wasn't planning on saying any of that. I didn't even know I was thinking it. But now that it's out in the open, I feel how true it is. All I want now is to make her life a little better every day. One day at a time, until she's everything I know she can be. I want her to give herself a chance.

Finally, Dad scrubs his hands over his face. "But you still sent those photos out."

"I didn't, I swear to God. It was somebody else—I was over at Kellan's. I'll give you the names of the people who were there, and they'll tell you that one of the girls took my phone and went through it, probably because I

told her off since she already bullied Elliana before you ever left for your honeymoon. I told her to get lost, and she was pissed. I would never have sent those pictures around to anybody. It's bad enough I took them."

"It's terrible that you took them."

"I know, Dad. Believe me. I know."

He takes a deep breath before he starts to pace in front of the coffee table that sits between us. "Tell me one thing. Tell me you weren't getting ready to hurt her when we walked in."

My skin is crawling with humiliation. Talk about bad timing. But I feel worse for her. She looked like she wanted to stop breathing. "I was not getting ready to hurt her," I murmur. "I will never hurt her again."

He's still staring at me like he's processing that when the front door opens. My heart lodges in my throat, and I jump to my feet, expecting to see Elliana again. I just want to ask if she forgives me. I'll beg if I have to.

But instead of two people walking in, there's only one. Irene runs her hands under her eyes, glaring at me. "I do not even know what to say to you, Carter." She goes to Dad, holding her arms out, wrapping them around his waist. "I've never seen her that upset. My poor baby. She doesn't deserve this."

"Where is she?" Dad looks over her shoulder, through the doorway leading out to the entry.

She pulls her head back, looking up at him. "I took her to a hotel. Best Western down the road. She needs some alone time."

My jaw is practically on the floor. "You left her alone?" I can't believe it. She comes in here, acting all tearful and heartbroken, but she left Elliana by herself?

"Excuse me." Her eyes are gleaming when she turns my way. Like she was just waiting for an excuse. "Last I checked, young man, you are in no position to question anything I do. Some kind of sick pervert who would take advantage of an innocent girl like my Elliana. I can't believe you would ruin our happy family like this."

"Wait a second." Dad holds up a hand like he's calling for silence, staring at her the way I've been. "You left her? I thought the point was to support her. So she knows she's not alone."

When her face crumbles, I know what's coming. She is almost disappointingly predictable. "Why are you getting mad at me?" she whines,

and before long, tears fill her eyes. Right on schedule. “I am not the bad guy here! It’s my daughter who—”

“Your daughter, who you dumped at a hotel when you supposedly care so much about her,” I mutter. This bitch.

Her gasp is ridiculously theatrical. “Are you going to let him get away with this?” she demands, staring at Dad. “Are you going to let him talk to me that way after what he’s done?”

“You shouldn’t have left her there,” Dad murmurs as his face falls. “You really shouldn’t have.”

“Unbelievable! He’s already turned you against me!” With a broken sob, she stomps her way out of the room. Her dramatic weeping echoes as she runs up the stairs. A door slams up there, and Dad sighs.

Before I can say anything—really, I don’t know what to say except to tell him I’m sorry he married who he did—he lets out a soft groan. “You heard her. The Best Western down the road. Somebody should go and be with her, so she knows she’s not alone. She’s already been alone long enough.”

I know we haven’t solved anything. This isn’t a family sitcom where problems are wrapped up in twenty-two minutes plus commercials. But for now, it’s enough that he’s willing to set everything aside so I can be with Elliana, which is the only place I want to be.

It only takes a few minutes to get there, and while I drive, I call her. “I’m on my way over to see you,” I tell her voicemail, since she’s not answering. “We’re gonna get through this. Don’t worry about anything.”

Why didn’t she answer? I hope she’s not too emotional. Who knows what Irene might’ve said? I shudder to think—I wouldn’t put anything past her.

I’m barely through the sliding doors and in the lobby before I bark, “I’m looking for my stepsister. I’m guessing she would’ve used my dad’s credit card to reserve a room. Elliana Montego is her name, but my dad is—”

“I know your father is Chief Wilder,” the middle-aged bald man behind the counter tells me.

“Please, can you tell me which room she’s in? He sent me over here to see her.” I mean, it’s kind of true.

“We don’t normally give away information about our guests, but she’s in room 215.” He points me toward the elevator at the end of the lobby, and I take it up one floor, following the signs to find her room. It’s dead quiet up

here, without anyone out in the hall. The perfect place for Irene to dump the daughter she doesn't give a shit about.

"It's me." I knock on the door once I reach the room, listening for anything coming from the other side. "Let me in. We'll figure this out together."

When the lock clicks and the door starts to open, a wave of relief like nothing I've ever felt washes over me and almost takes my knees out. She's tear-stained, red-faced, but she's here in front of me. Close enough to touch.

So I do. She's in my arms before the door is closed behind me. With my hand on the back of her head, I press my lips against her temple. "I am so sorry. For everything."

"What are we going to do?" She shudders in a silent sob that comes close to crushing my heart.

"For one thing, I'm staying here with you while we work this out." Kissing her head again, I pull back a little, brushing hair away from her forehead and tucking it behind her ears. She looks so broken. I would do anything to change that. "You don't ever have to be alone again. Believe me. I am with you always now."

"How can you say that?" A tear rolls down her cheek, and I catch it with my thumb before she closes her eyes. "Your dad is so mad. I'm surprised he even let you out of the house."

"I'll handle him. Don't worry about that. He's the one who wanted me to come over here to make sure you're all right." With a sigh, I add, "I can't believe she left you here."

"You can't? I can," she mutters.

"That's fine. I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere." I can't help but kiss her, like that will prove I mean every word. Her lips are salty, thanks to the tears that have coated her face—the bed is a little messed up, pillows dented, like she was lying there in tears before I showed up.

Every kiss leads to one more, then another, until I've backed her further into the room, and we're sitting together on the bed. It's so much simpler when it's just this, just us. Nobody else getting in the way, telling us what we can and can't do.

"I am so sorry for everything I've done." As much as I don't want to stop kissing her, she needs to hear this, but my hands never stop roaming her arms, shoulders, face. I need the connection. "There are no excuses for what I did. I'm so sorry for being who I was, but you've changed me. I

know it sounds stupid and simple, and maybe you don't believe it's that easy for someone to change, but I'm telling you the only truth I know. You have changed me, and I never want to be the person I was ever again."

Her bloodshot, shining eyes search my face. "I know you're different now. You've shown me that."

"And I'm going to keep changing for the better. That's all I want, because that's the only way I will deserve you."

Her throat works as she swallows hard. "What are you saying?" she whispers—the sound is so faint, I can barely hear it.

It pours out of me all at once, like a flood of words. "I'm saying I love you. I didn't know it for sure until back there at the house. I love you. I want to protect you. I want to guard you from anything that might hurt. I want to shield you from everything."

I cup her cheek, and whisper, "I want to worship you, because that's what you deserve. Every day for the rest of your life. You will never have to wonder if you're loved, if you're deserving, because I am going to prove it to you starting the minute I wake up. You have my word on that. I will do anything it takes, because you are all I want. I love you. I can't live without you."

"This is so much." She closes her eyes, and two fresh tears roll down her cheeks. "You know it's not that easy. We're not just two regular people. We're family now."

"Do I look like I give a shit about that? Do you care?"

"No," she admits, shrugging once she opens her eyes again. "It doesn't matter to me."

"And I couldn't care less, so what difference does that make? Who cares what the world thinks? It's not like we were raised together. I don't care about any of that."

Staring deep into her eyes, I whisper, "All I care about is you. Us. I care about what you need and how I can give it to you."

"I..." She's trembling, her eyes welling up again. "I... I love you, too. And I forgive you for what you did. I know it wasn't even about me, really. And I know you want to make up for it. I know you've made me feel better about myself than anybody ever has—nobody else has even bothered trying—I was finally starting to feel like there was hope for me. Because of you." The softest, most beautiful smile lights up her face, even though there are

still tears trickling down her cheeks. “And I have to ask myself, how much better can I get? How much better can you make me feel?”

I will show her right now.

A wave of pure love sweeps me up, makes me take her face in my hands to kiss her softly, tenderly, but with all the fire that burns for her in my heart. There is nothing like the feeling of her melting against me, and all it takes is a moan from her throat to unlock everything I feel inside. All of the heat, all of the craving, all the hunger.

Slowly, I run my hands over her skin, soaking in its softness, worshiping her with every touch. Pressing my lips to her jaw, her throat, letting myself sink into the pleasure of tasting her, hearing her moan, the feel of her hands running through my hair, then over my shoulders as I lay her back and stretch out on top of her.

“I do love you,” she whispers, draping a leg over my hip, pulling me closer between her legs. “Please, don’t ever hurt me.”

I have to stop kissing every inch of her long enough to lift my head and make sure we’re eye-to-eye when I reply, “Never again. You can trust me with your heart. I promise.”

Then I go back to where I left off, exploring her smooth thighs with one hand, pulling the top of her dress down with the other. She arches her back, gasping, and it’s magic. The way she gives herself over to pleasure like that. Letting herself get swept up the way I am, trusting me enough to give me her body.

We can’t pick up where we left off, because everything’s different now. Not even an hour later, we’re in a different place. I’m not going to bend her over the coffee table this time. I would rather kneel between her open thighs, slowly peel her panties down over her ankles, then feast on her like a starving beggar.

“Oh! Oh, god!” Right away, her hands find the back of my head and hold me in place so my tongue can work her swollen, wet slit. “Shit, that feels so good... don’t stop...”

I won’t. Not until she comes hard enough to drown me. She’s already halfway there, working her hips, grinding against my face. Opening my eyes, I watch her body move like a wave, undulating, and knowing I’m the reason why is better than any drug, any booze, anything I can imagine. This is what I want, to taste her on my tongue and hear her lose herself. I want it every day, always.

Just like I want her thighs to close around my head when she comes, blocking out everything but the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears. Her hips lift once, twice, before she falls back against the bed and goes limp. “Fuck, Carter...” she moans, gasping for breath.

“So sweet,” I whisper, lapping up her juices, spreading her lips to catch every drop of what flowed from her core and keeps flowing with every twitch of her muscles. She shivers at the touch, but that doesn’t stop me from claiming every ounce of her.

And it’s still not enough. Even when she sits up and pulls her dress over her head, it’s not enough. When she lies back again with her arms reaching for me so she can take me inside her, it’s not enough.

I don’t think it ever will be. Just like I can never make her happy enough. But I’m going to try.

I can’t get out of my clothes fast enough. Once I’m finished, I lower myself over her so her hands can run over me. Her touch is electric, making it hard to be gentle as I guide my dripping head to her wet, pulsing pussy. Our eyes lock when I find her quivering hole—and when I push past it, filling her up, she arches her back and moans my name. “Carter...”

Between that and the way she is still fluttering inside, I have to fight to hold onto my control. She moves with me, legs locked around my back, her arms around my shoulders, her eyes never leaving mine.

It’s almost scary, the way I would swear she’s staring straight into my soul as I move inside her, taking her in deep, slow strokes because I don’t want this to end. Not ever. I’ve never felt anything like it and might not ever again, so I want it to go on forever. The two of us in this room, in this bed, making something together. Us, the way it’s meant to be. I understand that now. She was always supposed to be mine.

We’re not fucking. We’re making love. Something in my soul sings, and I almost want to laugh even as she starts to get tighter around me, jerking her hips to match my strokes, pulling me deeper, making it harder to hold on. “Come with me,” she begs, clutching me tighter, whimpering louder the closer she gets.

“Give it to me,” I whisper before brushing my mouth against hers, savoring every inch of her, every sound she makes. “Come for me.”

“I am... I am... Carter!” And then she does, clutching tight around me for a second before the fluttering starts.

Fuck, it's incredible, it's too much. I have to give in. I'm barely out of her in time to spill my cum across her inner thigh, marking her, claiming her as mine. This is it. She is mine forever.

And I'm hers.

All we have to do now is break the news to the rest of the world.

When she opens her eyes and looks up at me, wearing a soft, tender smile, I know we can do it.

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THIRTY-TWO

Elliana

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS? I’m serious.”

Carter barely stops short of rolling his eyes before he unbuckles his seatbelt and angles his body until he’s facing me. There are dark circles under his eyes after we talked for hours, but he looks sharp and focused. I’m glad. One of us needs to be. “I’m going to tell you the same thing I’ve told you, what, seven times this morning? At least?”

“But who’s counting,” I mutter.

“I have never been more sure of anything.” Lifting my hand, he presses his lips to my knuckles. “There’s no going back, so you’re stuck with me. I hate to break it to you.”

“I guess I’ll learn to live with it.”

He has a way of breaking through my fear and making me believe everything is going to be all right.

But this is huge, what we’re about to do. We talked it over until I almost lost my voice and finally had to go to sleep to get at least a little rest before going home together today. I still don’t feel exactly confident, but I have Carter next to me as we walk up to the front door, hand in hand.

The weather is a lot nicer today, but I still have a hot, sort of sick feeling inside. It’s nerves, knowing I’m going to have to face Mom. If there was a question in my mind of exactly how she feels about me, she answered it yesterday when she basically kicked me out of the car. It’s going to take a

lot for me to keep myself in check. I'll do it, if only for Paul's sake. I know if I make things harder for her, that will just make it harder for him. And he's been good to me. Better than she ever has.

"We've got this." Carter sounds a lot more confident than I feel as we walk into the house.

It's quiet, almost eerie. The shopping bags we left in the living room are still there. It's amazing to think it was barely twenty-four hours ago that we went shopping. Everything was different then.

The sound of something hitting a plate in the kitchen makes me freeze solid. It's like roots grow from my feet and drive down deep into the floor to hold me in place.

"I'm scared," I whisper. Probably nothing I actually needed to say out loud, but I need to let it out.

"I know," Carter whispers back, before tugging my hand. "But remember what we keep saying about that. You're stronger than you think you are."

Now is not the time I need to have that thrown in my face, no matter how nice he's trying to be.

"Are you coming in, or what?" Paul asks from the kitchen. I can't tell from the sound of his voice how he's feeling, but I can't imagine it's much better than how he was feeling yesterday.

"Let's get it over with." He pulls me along with him down the hall, into the sun-drenched kitchen, where I'm sorry to see Mom sitting across from Paul in the breakfast nook. She doesn't bother trying to hide her anger as we walk into the room, staring holes through both of us.

Paul, on the other hand, looks tired more than anything else. Concerned, maybe, but I don't see the same bitterness. Maybe that's a good sign? "Have you eaten?" he asks us.

"Is that what we need to talk about right now?" Mom rolls her eyes at him.

"I'm not hungry," I whisper. Can she pretend to be decent for once?

Her sharp gaze hits me before she looks down at our joined hands. Carter's grip tightens like he's trying to tell me he won't let go, that I'm safe with him. My spine straightens.

"This is all very nice," she murmurs, staring at our joined hands, "and it's very nice that you're able to move past what happened, but you cannot be together. Not this way."

“We’ve done a lot of talking,” Paul explains in a much quieter voice. “The writing’s on the wall. And we understand you might have feelings for each other, but you are stepsiblings. You can’t ignore that.”

Still, he doesn’t sound as cold or dismissive as Mom. Almost like he understands or is trying to. At the end of the day, that’s all we can ask.

“So this ends,” Mom concludes.

How am I supposed to forget how I feel? Am I supposed to see Carter every day and pretend? Do I go the rest of my life acting like there’s never been anything more between us? I can’t. I can’t live in this house with him, right across the hall, so close, but so far away. It’ll be torture. I can barely breathe when I think of it.

“So what you’re saying is...” Carter squeezes my hand again, glancing at me, and I wish those blue eyes didn’t make my heart swell like they do. “We can’t be together. We can live here together, but we can’t be together as anything more than stepsiblings.”

“Yes,” Mom says with a sigh, rolling her eyes again. “That’s the idea. I can’t believe you would even consider anything else. So this is what happened when we went away? You decided to twist Elliana up?”

“Irene,” Paul whispers.

There is something extremely gratifying about the disappointment in his voice. Granted, I can’t understand how he would expect anything more from her. But then, I guess he must have turned a blind eye to a lot of things if he figured it was a good idea for them to get married in the first place. He ignored all of her red flags—and there are many.

“I didn’t twist anybody up,” Carter murmurs.

I’m proud of his self-control. He is miles away from the Carter I first met—impatient, self-absorbed, arrogant. “And I know—we both do—that this is unusual. But it’s real. We have changed each other for the better, and I’m not going to pretend I regret a minute of us. I told Dad yesterday, I’m going to do everything I can to make up for the harm I caused.”

He takes a deep breath, rolls his shoulders back, and adds, “And if living here means having to treat Elliana as nothing more than my stepsister, I would rather live someplace else with her as my girlfriend.”

“You’re deluded,” Mom scoffs. Paul, I notice, doesn’t react. “How would you even start to do that? Where do you think you would go that anyone would accept the two of you together this way? Are you out of your mind?”

“Our parents got married,” I whisper, trembling.

This is it. This is when I grow up. It’s all been leading to this moment, because nothing has ever mattered more.

Rolling my shoulders back the way Carter did, I continue, “That doesn’t mean we can’t be together. We weren’t raised as brother and sister. We only met, what? Six weeks ago? Two months? And we fell in love.”

Wow. That wasn’t easy to say, but a wave of relief washes over me now that I’ve said it. Now that it’s out there.

Mom’s mouth falls open, eyes bulging. “I cannot believe you.”

“Do you know what? I can’t believe you.” Uh-oh. The floodgates have opened. There is no holding back what’s going to come out. And it feels good. It feels right. Pure energy rushes through me, making my heart pump and my nerves tingle. “You see this dress? You’ve been wanting me to dress this way forever, haven’t you? You’ve wanted me to be the kind of person you wish I was—confident, normal.” I make air quotes with my free hand.

Then I point to Carter. “He is the reason I’m able to wear this dress. He’s the reason I was able to get over my fear of water and get in the pool. He’s the reason I have friends at school. I know he’s done some pretty horrible things.” We can’t pretend it didn’t happen. “But I’m willing to move past it, because I am happier with him than without him. If you want me to be a real, whole person, this is how it’s going to happen. With Carter. Because when I’m with him, I feel like I can have a life of my own for the first time.”

She’s not capable of processing a word of it, because that would mean thinking of anybody besides herself. It’s a good thing I didn’t expect her to have this big, revelatory moment. I just needed to get it off my chest.

“Well, good for you.” She scoffs with a humorless laugh. “You found your voice, and all it took was sleeping with your stepbrother. Now the two of you want to run away together.”

This time when she laughs, it’s loud, high-pitched. “How do you think you’re going to live? How will you support yourselves? Because I know for damn sure Paul is not going to pay for it.”

“Yes, I will,” Paul says.

“What?” Mom snaps in horror. Her head swings his way so fast it has to hurt. “You’re not serious!”

“I am,” he says with a sigh. “I’ll help them if this is what they really want.”

I'm not sure if he's saying it because he truly supports us, or because he feels bad for the way Mom is beating up on us.

"You can't do that!" she almost screams, shaking.

He doesn't match her energy. "I can, and I will, because it's my money to do with as I wish."

He glances at her, his jaw going tight. "So this is my decision."

When all she can do is sputter, he waves an arm toward us. "Look at this. My son stood up to me yesterday and admitted what he did, but he also told me about everything he did to try to make it right. And come on!" He barks out a laugh. "I have heard Elliana string more words together right here in this kitchen this morning than I have the entire time she's lived under this roof. It's obvious they help each other become better versions of themselves. They shouldn't be punished for the two of us finding each other and getting married."

"I cannot believe this," Mom whispers, folding her arms, crossing her legs, and swinging her foot in angry circles. "I must be dreaming this."

"You'll get used to it," Paul tells her.

I really, really like him. He's exactly the kind of husband she needs to keep her in line. He'll give her plenty of freedom, let her take advantage if it makes her happy, but he knows when to rein her in, too.

"Unbelievable." She throws her arms into the air and jumps up from the table, storming off. Paul wears a regretful little smile, exchanges a quick nod with Carter, then follows her.

"Did that just happen?" I whisper when we're alone in the room. I'm afraid to move. Afraid to speak too loudly. Afraid I'll wake up from the dream where everything went exactly the way I wanted it to.

"Yeah. It did." And then his arms are around me, pulling me close, and I have everything I need. My knees are weak with relief, but it's okay.

I'm not going to fall.

He will always keep me from falling.

EPILOGUE

Carter

“WE’RE NEIGHBORS! OFFICIALLY!” Wren throws her arms around Elliana the second she’s through the front door of the house we moved into last week. “All we had to do is walk down the street from our house! I’m so happy!”

“I can still barely believe it.” Elliana looks a little dazed, but happy. I know it’s still not easy for her to accept friendship, but she’s getting better at it.

“Come on in. I want to show you what we did so far.” Elliana links arms with her. “We still have to finish getting furniture for some of the rooms, but there’s no big hurry.”

“And we can help you out!” Maya reminds her once we reach the kitchen, where she is pouring drinks from a pitcher. “We’ll go shopping. It’s so much fun. I found so many great pieces in town, even at the thrift shops and estate sales.”

“That does sound like fun.” Elliana glances toward me, and we share a smile. The kind of smile people give each other at parties when they have their own world they live in together. That secret, knowing look nobody else is part of. She’s happy. A little overwhelmed, maybe, but happy.

“I’ve got to be honest.” Preston is sitting on one of the kitchen counters, leaning against the fridge while eyeing my girlfriend. “I wouldn’t recognize you if I saw you by yourself on the street.”

He's trying to be nice, but she still gets a little freaked when people pay attention to her. Sliding her hands down the front of a light, flower-printed sundress, she murmurs, "Oh. Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah, is that a good thing?" I cross my arms, narrowing my eyes at him.

"I'm just saying." He never did learn when to let things go instead of digging himself deeper. "You're not wearing your glasses anymore, and your hair is pulled back when it used to hang in your face."

"Keep it up," Briggs mutters, snickering.

"Okay, fine. I'll stop now." Preston takes a gulp from his beer bottle while the rest of us laugh.

"Thank you, I guess," Elliana replies, but she's grinning. Again, we exchange a look. I am so proud of her every day. She has come so far.

"The backyard will be perfect for parties," Easton announces, coming in from out there.

"I don't know. I think my big partying days are over," I tell him. "I'm going to start a new policy. You can't get in unless you wear your clothes the whole time."

"I thought this was a housewarming party, not a 'break Easton's heart' party," he mutters. Kellan gives him a shove from behind. The rest of us all groan and roll our eyes.

"People change when they get serious about somebody," Preston grumbles. "They get that—"

"Please, tell me," Tucker almost growls, putting his arm around Maya's waist. "How do people get once they're serious about somebody?"

It seems like Preston can learn his lesson, since he chooses to drink from his bottle again instead of answering.

"You'll get to that place someday." Tucker pulls a couple of beers from the fridge and hands one to Briggs. "I mean, if you ever find somebody who is willing to put up with you."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Maya decides.

"Why did I even come here today?" he asks nobody in particular.

"I'm sure it wasn't for free beer," I suggest, and we all laugh together.

Can this really be my life? Hosting a party for my friends in my actual house? I don't have to worry about hiding it from Dad anymore. But I wasn't kidding—I'm not throwing the kind of parties I used to. I'm past that point. Elliana got me past it.

Elliana, who juggles her hostess duties like a pro. Preston was awkward with how he said it, but he made a good point. She's almost unrecognizable when I compare her to the girl I first met, who was pretty much scared of her own shadow. She feels more comfortable now in her own skin without her mom breathing down her neck all the time, and her personality can shine through.

Still, I understand how she feels when she closes the door after the last guests leave. When she slumps against it with her eyes closed. "Oh, my god. That was exhausting."

"But fun?" I ask, because I have to make sure.

Her eyes open, and she smiles at me with her back against the wood. "Very fun. Did I do all right?"

"How can you even wonder that? Of course you did."

"It's bad enough I'm still really not used to being around lots of people," she reminds me, pulling the clip from her dark hair and shaking it out around her shoulders. "But making sure everybody's happy and that they have everything they need? That's a whole other level."

"You know..." I go to her, one hand on either side of her head so I can lean in. "We never have to do that again if you don't want to."

"No!" Her eyes go wide as she shakes her head. "No, I do want to. I want to get better at it so I'm not, you know, doubting myself all the time."

"Practice, practice," I whisper. "Like swimming. You're getting better with that all the time." Granted, she doesn't like being in the deep end without holding onto the edge, but that's still huge progress.

"How did everything change so fast?" Her hands touch my chest, and I'm probably some kind of sex addict because that's all it takes for me to start to melt. I can't get enough of her.

"I don't know," I have to admit, brushing a kiss against her forehead, then the tip of her nose. "But I like it. I really like it. And I want more of it. Every day."

She tips her head back so her lips will meet mine, and I can't help but capture her bottom lip and graze it with my teeth. "Just like I want more of you every day. Am I too greedy?" I ask, rolling my hips so my thickening dick will press against her.

"I don't think there is such a thing," she decides, letting her hands slide down my chest until one of them is cupping my crotch, rubbing it slowly.

Her touch makes my breath catch, and she giggles. “I don’t know. If you are, that means I’m greedy, too.”

“What can we do about that?”

“Who says we have to do anything about it?” Her tongue darts out to meet mine and fuck, it’s amazing. She is amazing. She’s everything.

And right now, she’s about to make me come in my pants. “Put this in your mouth, instead,” I pant, fumbling with my fly now that all the blood has left my brain. She helps, slowly sinking to her knees and wrapping her fingers around me once she pulls me free from my boxer briefs.

“What do I get if I put it in my mouth?” Looking up at me, her eyelashes flutter. The girl has learned a lot in a very short amount of time. And she loves driving me crazy.

“It depends on if you do a good job or not.” Her hair is so soft and thick under my hands, and I sink them deep, pulling her head closer. “So find out. Make sure I’m hard for that pussy.”

“You know, this is one of the only parts of the house we haven’t done this.” But she changes that, parting her lips, taking me inside and pressing her tongue against me while she gently sucks.

“Fuck, that’s good,” I whisper, letting my head fall back as she works me. Her moans vibrate through my body, making my balls lift, making my hips move so I can feed more of myself to her, hitting the back of her throat over and over while she moans around me. “You’re so fucking good to me,” I groan, lost in sensation, lost in her, wishing it could never end but knowing it has to.

“Up,” I grunt, because it’s all I can say while I gasp for air. When she doesn’t move fast enough, I take her by the arms and push her back against the door, then change my mind and turn her around so she’s facing away from me.

Her smooth, soft ass feels so good under my hands before I pull her thong down to her knees with her dress bunched up around her waist. I can’t wait. I need her now. She arches her back, giving herself to me, angling her pussy so I can sink in deep.

“Oh, my god!” she moans, her hands pressed against the door as she pushes back against me. I cover them with mine, locking our fingers, moving hard and fast. Fucking her, claiming her. She’s mine. This pussy is mine.

“Fucking tight!” I gasp before she turns her head so I can claim her mouth, too. Every stroke, every tap of my balls against her makes her whimper louder, until there’s nothing but one long, high-pitched sound coming from her mouth into mine. She’s getting tighter, too, squeezing me, trying to milk me dry.

And as much as I give her, she gives it back to me, doubling the friction, making our bodies crash together in a rhythm that gets faster and faster until she clenches tight and lets out a high-pitched shriek. I crash against her one last time before letting the rush take over, making me weak while every drop that was in my balls rushes into her.

“I like it even better that way,” she whispers once she can breathe again, still leaning against the door while her body heaves. “When you come inside me.” Yes, because one of the conditions of us living together was her being on the pill. *“We’re not ready to be grandparents yet.”*

That means more spontaneous moments like this, locked against her with our mixed cum leaking out between us as we catch our breath. “I think we’ve officially christened every part of the house now,” I murmur in her ear.

“I think you’re right.” She heaves a sigh, then says, “I guess we’ll have to christen the furniture once we buy it all.”

“I love the way you think.” Pulling back, I think about all the different things we still need. “That’s it. We’re going shopping right now. No time to waste.”

The best part is when she laughs and her eyes light up, reminding me one more time what makes her perfect for me.

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Easten and Preston’s story is next in [Toxic Hope](#).

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About the Author

Born and raised in Germany, Cassandra attended business school in her home town before immigrating to America when she was only eighteen. At nineteen, she married her husband who was active duty military at that time. Together, they traveled the country for years, before finally settling down. Now, she lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband of sixteen years, their three children, two dogs, and one hairless cat.

With a love for reading, that love slowly transpired into writing she put her fingers to the keyboard and started writing about the dark side of romance.

C. Hallman is a USA Today Bestselling Author who wrote her debut Novel in 2018 and has since published over 100 books in various romance sub genres. Her works have been on numerous bestseller lists and have been translated into 8 languages around the world.



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