

# **THE UNEDITED VERSION OF** **PURE PERCEPTION**

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# **Pure Perception (Web of Deception #2)**

**Michelle Watson**

*To the fighters that never give up.  
Your determination is awe-inspiring.*

*To the seekers who are forever curious.  
Your knowledge is unlimited and knows no bounds.*

*To the compassionate ones.  
Your kindness is a blessing I hope we all will learn from.*

*To the scarred ones.  
You are more beautiful than you know.*

*To the lovers.  
Love fiercely.*

*Just because my scars aren't visible doesn't mean I  
don't have them.*

—Hunter Knight (Pure Illusion)

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CHAPTER ONE

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**Perception:** the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses.

*Known and unknown hazards and threats lurk within the shadows of the golden path that leads to the end of the rainbow. All that you see and don't see are set purposely to question your intuition. Remember within this world of reverie trust your two eyes and heartbeat.*

Beyond the paved asphalt roads and proud American waving flags from the porches of neat rows of identical colonial brick houses and further past the lush green lawns and churches, something sinister harbors within Bayham County. The darkness may rest within the moss-covered oaks of the small southern town of Cherry Creek, North Carolina.

## PROLOGUE

12:00P.M., September, 20<sup>th</sup>

*Hunter age nine*

*Isabel age eight*

*Today, I am getting married. Today, I will be a changed person. Today, I will be united with my best friend forever. But, right now, I get free time with my wife-to-be. Isabel and I pick cherries off the trees by her house. Her mom will bake a cherry pie as a wedding gift for us. Her mom makes the best cherry pies.*

*Isabel collects a handful of red fruit and drops them in the basket, glancing at Tyler and Hero while they laugh and splash each other in the stream. "I can't believe we're getting married."*

*My stomach twists with disappointment and I feel my whole face frown because she says that like she doesn't want to. "You don't want to get married to me?"*

*She reaches down to smooth the wrinkles between my eyebrows with her fingertips. Isabel does that all the time when I pout. It makes me feel like a child, but I love it. "I do want to marry you, Hunter. I just can't believe Caleb and my parents agreed, I can't believe their throwing us a real wedding. Do you not see them assembling everything?"*

*I look back and notice Ivan rolling out the white aisle that Isabel will soon walk down. My dad and*

*Isabelle are chatting happily as they add white orchards and white roses to the bowery altar.*

*“It only makes sense that they’re part of this,” I say, looking back at her.*

*“Really? Why?”*

*“Because, this is special. You’re special to me. And I plan to keep you for a really long time. Forever, Isabel. You’re mine.”*

*Her pretty face colors red and she turns her head to hide her massive smile.*

*Yeah.*

*I’m marrying my best friend today.*

*I can love this girl forever.*

# **PART I**

## **FORGETTING THE UNFORGETTABLE**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Beginning*

“Can we dance for a bit?”

Isabel face contorts into shock. She shouldn't look so astonished. I'll use any excuse to touch her again, feel her body rubbing against mine.

“Dance?” She's smiling, so I know she wants to.

*Come on.*

*Get over here.*

Attempting to be blasé and indifferent, I shrug. “It only seems right.” I simply open my arms and she comes right to me. Isabel isn't conscious of her decision that just ended her marriage before it begins.

She's mine.

I wrap my arms around her. She nestles into me. I breathe in her hair, her scent. My dick is instantly furious with me. We dance in small circles for a while until I accumulate a plan.

*The tables have certainly turned.*

If I plant the seed of doubt in her head maybe it will thrive and I'll win for once. She'll realize what's standing right in front of her face.

What else am I to do when my first love doesn't want me anymore?

*MINE.*

*MINE.*

*MINE.*

Here goes...

“Humor me with a short game, okay?”

She nods against my shoulder.

“What if I told you that your lips were made only to be kissed by me?”

She stiffens in my embrace. “Hunter, what kind of game is this?”

My fingers dig into her sides. “Just humor me, Isabel.”

“What if I told you that I’m happy now?”

Happy?

Yeah.

Fucking.

Right.

Isabel doesn’t do *happy*.

“What if I told you that I’m too selfish to care?” I really am. Isabel shouldn’t underestimate what I’m capable of; she’ll come out unscathed in the end for it.

Her breath hitches.

*Yes, baby.*

*You finally comprehend what I’m doing.*

I’m on a roll here. No need to stop now. “What if I told you that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to have you to myself again?”

She pushes back to look at me, her expression is wary. “Even break my heart.”

My girl gets it.

I grin so wide my cheeks hurt. “Even breaking your pretty little heart all over again.” Her eyes widen. She’s



caught in my web, and I'm closing in. "What if I told you that you belong to me and I'm willing to sabotage your future with him just to have you in my bed at night?"

Her face blanches. "Hunter, stop. I don't want to play anymore."

Taking my time, I scrutinize every feature of her face. She always gets anxious when I do this. Her chest swells and her brows always furrow like she's trying to read my thoughts. I still affect her. I hold her at arm's length, smirking and very proud of myself.

"I have a Christmas gift for you." She looks down at her closed fist.

I let her go in fear that she might slap or punch me again. No doubt that I deserve it. "Really? I feel bad. I didn't get you anything." *Yet.*

"Don't worry about it. Here..." she seems nervous as she drops three thin bands in my palm.

"Rings?"

Isabel gives me an impish smile that she has perfected. "They're for your thumb. Read them."

My eyes turn into slants as I read the fine writing, placing them on my left thumb. "Three little angels." A white-hot pain too indiscernible to explain spreads throughout my chest.

*Shit!*

"For the babies," she whispers as if in trouble.

"Isabel. Our dehydrated marshmallows are getting cold."

Fucking Max.

He isn't going to let her out of his sight for too long, especially with me around.

She peers over my shoulder and then takes a deep breath like Max has reminded her of the new priorities in her life which isn't me. Not anymore.

My eyes quickly drop to the rings when her gaze shifts back to mine. I don't want her to know how much she has just destroyed me. "You don't have to be happy, Hunter. Just be enough." Then she runs from me. How can she run from me when she drops a bomb that's going to annihilate my shattered world?

"You are my enough," I say, turning just in time to see Isabel walking through the door with a forged smile on her face. Max closes the front door, cradling Birthday in the crook of his arm.

\*\*\*

Dr. Tomas sits across from me in his large leather chair while I lie across a backless white settee. He scribbles notes on a pad and takes occasional sips from a black coffee mug. I always wonder what he keeps in there—surely not coffee. He's been my psychiatrist for the past seven months. I like him. He isn't all technical and politically correct like the rest. Dr. Tomas's office isn't a sterile white box. There are subtle splashes of vibrant colors in every space and corner. He's down to earth and I like his office. It doesn't make me feel like a mental case, which I probably am.

"You said it's been two weeks since you last saw her?"

“Yeah,” I say, twirling all three rings around my thumb. “But I plan to make a visit after this session.”

“Is that what’s best for you or what’s best for her?”

“I think it’s what’s best for the both of us.” *I know she misses me too.*

With a quick flick of his wrist, he jots down something. “Perhaps you should start focusing on what’s in the best interest of Isabel. The both of you have been through a great deal; don’t you want her to be happy? Do you think she deserves it?”

My entire body tenses. Every fiber in my body is aching. I feel sick. “She’s happiest with me. I care about her. Max is sleeping beside her. Not me. I am being very selfless at this point.”

“It seems like you’re only thinking about yourself here. You deliberately told her that you will sabotage her future. That doesn’t sound very selfless to me.”

I feel that familiar pinch in my heart. It’s always there before a devastating event happens. Like a warning bell before everything goes haywire. “What are you insinuating?”

He looks up from his pad, his brown eyes stares into mine. “That you are not as selfless as you may seem. You are absurdly self-seeking when it comes to Isabel. Just because her future isn’t with you that means, to you, she should not have a future at all. That is not selfless and that is not an act of affection. You say you care about her, well, isn’t it time you acted on that?”

I scrub my face with my hands, sighing and exasperated. “And how do I do that?”

“Instead of focusing on what’s best for you, you concentrate on what’s solely best for Isabel. You give

her space. You release her. You let her live her life. You let her make mistakes. You let her learn from them. You cannot protect her from the world, Hunter. You let her go.”

There it is...the truth.

*But how do I let her go when it goes against my every instinct?*

“So I shouldn’t see her anymore?”

“Not only that, you should not get involved. You have a life; she has hers.”

I glance at the rings, unsure of all the emotions raging through me. “What if she comes back?”

He gives me a knowing smile. “If you release a dove into the wild and it comes back, then the dove is forever yours.”

Once I reach home, I am physically ill. Candy comes straight here after she gets off work. She has me tucked in bed with a cool rag on my forehead and a thermometer in my mouth. She runs a comforting hand over my heated cheek. Candy stands beside me, her expression concerned. “My poor, Gummy.”

I reach out and loop my arm around her waist, snatching her off her feet and tossing her on the bed with me. My head settles on the fine cushions of her smooth breasts and she holds me there, repeatedly kissing my face. Candy mothers me a lot. I don’t mean she tries to rule every aspect of my world; she just treats me like a treasured gift. She caters to me every chance she gets and she does it like she can’t get enough of it. Every man

enjoys being pampered. If they deny it then they're a fucking liar.

The thermometer goes off. She retrieves it from my mouth, squinting to read it. "Gummy, you're burning up. One O five."

"I don't feel good," I mumble, nuzzling more into her chest. There's something disarming about laying your head on a woman's chest. This simple action transports me into a world of vulnerability. It makes me feel like a needy, defenseless child.

"Gummy, I'm gonna get you all better. I promise." She kisses my chin. "I have to get you a cup of Mama's tea to help break your fever. Okay?"

I nod, unable to speak. My throat feels like it's on fire. She lays my head back on the pile of pillows and jumps off the bed. Her voice floats up the stairs as she chats with her mom on the phone—something about tripling the dosage.

I've never been this sick. It's like a thick cloud of misery has washed over my body and infused with my blood. I don't have control over myself, which I more than don't like.

Candy returns with a warm cup of something the color of honey. She holds it up for me while I sip it. It burns as it goes down. It has moonshine in it. I feel its effect instantly; I'm more sluggish and disorientated. "W-w-what is this?"

She wipes at the sweat on my face with the damp rag. "Shush. It's good for you. Relax and close your eyes. I'm going to make you better." I give in for once and do as she says. I'm floating in and out of consciousness where time dissipates.

The scent of dark berries fills my nostrils. Warm hands stroke my hair and my chest. I'm holding someone thin and fragile in my arms. I receive a light peck on the tip of my nose. "How are you feeling, Hunter?"

*Isabel?*

*Am I dreaming?*

I want to open my eyes but I can't. My lids are ridiculously heavy. I am still in a semi drug induced coma.

"We think you have the flu. If your fever doesn't break tonight, we're taking you to the hospital."

"Maybe you should distance yourself, Pumpkin. So you won't get sick."

*What the fuck is Max doing here?*

"I've already had my flu shot, Max. It's okay."

I don't want them to be here, witnessing me while I am completely out of it. When I try to talk my words is a burble of incomprehensible speech.

"What's he's saying?" Max asks with amusement in his voice.

"Maybe he wants some water?" Candy says.

"No. I know what he wants," Isabel says, smoothing back wet strands of my hair from my forehead. She cuddles closer to me, spooning me from the back, placing her soft lips to my ear and her hand over my racing heart. "Calm down. It'll be okay, Hunter. I'm here. I'll hold you until you fall asleep. I want you to get better. I love you."

I groan and mumble incoherently, trying to push her away but she keeps me in her grasp.

*Leave.*

*Please just go away.*

*Get the hell out!*

Isabel holds me tighter, whispering reassurances in my ear. Before I blackout again, I feel wetness trickle down my cheeks.

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Every inch of my flesh is covered in a fine sheen of sweat. My fever has finally broken. I blink a few times before I open my eyes. When my sight comes into focus I notice Isabel asleep with all her limbs clinging to my body; wisps of her dark hair is fanned across her face, sticking to her slightly parted lips. The silver moonlight beams, filtering through the windows highlighting the subtle features of her beauty. It's entirely involuntary when I slide my nose down her cheek, breathing in her intoxicating scent.

She turns her face towards me, her mouth seeking attention.

*She wants me to kiss her?*

“Yes, Isabel?” I rasp, my heart pounding in my ears.

“Mmm.”

Leaning forward, I gingerly brush my lips over hers. She sloppily sucks at my mouth, moaning. A conceited smile spreads across my face as I recline and take in her disappointed expression. “Please,” she mumbles.

“What do you want?”

“You. Please.”

I put us both out of our misery and kiss her again. Her soft mouth opens as I gently bite down on her bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth. My hands gild up

the curves of her body, cupping her perky breasts that fit perfectly in my palms. I want to satisfy my insatiable hunger and use my teeth and mouth to bite and devour her. This also terrifies me because I won't be able to stop until I taste her fucking soul.

The iceberg winking at me pulls me from my delusion.

*Fuck!*

*She's marrying Max.*

*Not me.*

Breathing heavily, I push her away and she whimpers in protest. "Wake up, Isabel." She groans, still asleep. I shake her arm until she stirs.

"What?" she pouts, wiping at her eyes like the little kitten she is.

My heart clenches in my chest. She's so damn cute, but my expression remains cold and impassive. "Why are you here?"

My gruff voice must have a sobering effect because she bolts up, blinking at me. "You're up. Are you feeling better?"

"Why are you here?" I repeat, eyeing her critically.

She winces and sighs, shoving her hair from her face. "I couldn't sleep knowing you were sick."

I let my gaze fall to the pillow with her head indented still pressed in it. "You slept pretty fine to me."

"Because you were beside me," she whispers almost too low to hear. "I like to listen to your heartbeat. It's my favorite lullaby."

To keep from kissing or fucking her, my fingers clench the sheets under me. "Then why is it Max's heart you're listening to?"



She turns her gaze towards the windows. “He loves me. I love him.”

“I love you more.”

“And that’s the problem, isn’t it? It’s hectic with you, up and down and all around. Max...Max is steady. He’s the perfect foundation for me.”

“But is he what you need?”

She shrugs. I understand why she shifted her face to the window. I can’t see her expression that way. “He has terrible nightmares, Hunter. Every night he relives what happened to us, every night he sees me emptying bullets into his father.” She visibly trembles, her slender hands fisting at her sides. Is it out of anger or fear? “He doesn’t even touch me. Max says we should wait until we can’t wait anymore more.” My heart hurts for her. “When he touches me, I think he sees...” her voice fades like a wisps of smoke in the wind.

“You killing his father,” I finish her sentence, “It’s not your fault. He deserved to die.” I inch closer and lift her chin with my thumb and index finger. Her eyes are glossy with tears she refuses to shed. “You didn’t do anything wrong. He deserved it, baby.” Isabel’s eyelids flutter closed, glistening tears running down her cheeks. It’s inevitable when I kiss them away. I wish I could swallow her pain. If I could, I would in a heartbeat. My wet lips brush over hers in a silent plea. Her breath hitches as she parts her lips. I slip my tongue inside the sweet heaven of her mouth and she groans.

Things take their natural progression when I strip her shirt off, her bra next, her jeans after. Crawling down her body, I rest my forehead against her abdomen, trying to catch my breath. My fingers grip the waistband of her

panties. She shivers in anticipation. My eyes drift up to hers, a small grin curving my lips. The hunger, fire, and lust in her eyes are all tangible, flowing from her and into me. The intoxicating cocktail is potent and makes my head heady, almost too overwhelming to endure.

Almost.

In this moment I now know what I was born for. I was born to be with Isabel. Every curve of her body fits mine flawlessly. If God created Eve from Adam's rib, then I haven't been a whole man since Isabel left. She was made for me. I was made to be with her...to protect and love her.

Her fingers glide into my hair and tug hard as I slide my nose inside her thigh. The scent of her arousal is evident. She smells amazing. "I can smell you, baby." Her breath catches in her throat and she tugs my hair harder. I hiss, nipping her thigh. She instantly loosens her grip. My hair has grown drastically. I should really get it cut, but Isabel once told me she likes my hair long. I keep it this length for her. Burying my nose in the center of the dampness in her panties, I relish in the scent of her. She moans, thrusting her hips forward. *Greedy little thing*. With strained determination, I keep control and I don't submit to the powerful urge to eat her up right this second. I have to bare my soul to her first.

Her entire body quivers, thirsting for my touch. "Isabel?"

"Yes, Hunter?" Her voice is huskier; it's like warm silk wrapped around my dick.

"Let's go. Right now. Let's disappear together. We can leave everything behind. Let's jump in my truck and just go. You love me. I love you. We don't have to suffer

like this. Why should we? Fuck what other people have to say, baby. We only matter. Let's just go. Please." My voice has taken on a pleading tone, my expression is desperate. I'll fucking get on my knees and kiss her feet at this point.

*Come with me and let's leave the depths of hell together.*

She reaches down and touches my face and my mouth, her eyes leaking tears I feel in my chest. "You're incredibly beautiful, Hunter." Her fingers trace the shape of my mouth, leaving them tingling. "Prettier than a man has the right to be." She gives me a woeful smile. "I love you. You do know that, right?" Captivated by her haunting gaze, I nod. "So you understand when I tell you I can't. What we have defies logic. I don't completely understand it. We are explosive when we're together. It's dangerous. I love you, but I can't... I won't. Max needs me."

Before I can comprehend any further, Isabel dashes out the bed and scoops up her wrinkled clothes from the floor. She gets dressed rather quickly. I'm left with the strangest emotions and sensations, none of them are positive or pleasant. I don't utter a word when she turns around to face me with tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Hunter, for everything you've done, everything you have sacrificed. It's been all for me. I appreciate that, but it's time for me to live my life and for you to live yours. Just let me be content. I can't do this anymore." Isabel sprints out my room. I hear the front door slam closed.

Collapsing on my bed, I stare at the ceiling. *She ran from me. Again.* The pain in her eyes is unmistakable. I'm torturing her. I have two options: Make every day of

her living world misery until she comes to her senses and be with me, or I can let her go. It doesn't take me long to come up with the only reasonable conclusion.

Candy comes to me when she gets off work. She feeds me more soup and mentions something about going to nursing school. I nod numbly, not giving her my full attention. The only thing on my mind is letting Isabel go forever.

# **ONE YEAR WITHOUT ISABEL**

# **TWO YEARS WITHOUT ISABEL**

# **THREE YEARS WITHOUT ISABEL**

## CHAPTER TWO

### *It's My Party I Can Cry If I Want To*

“Happy Birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Hunter! Happy birthday to you!” Candy sings merrily into the phone. Though I’m seated alone in a booth in a dark corner of a kink club, I can’t resist the goofy smile on my face. She never misses a year.

“Thanks, Candy.”

“So what’s all the way in Vegas?”

“Do I really need a reason to come to Sin City?”

Candy doesn’t need to know the truth. It’s been hell for the past three years. I pushed everyone away, except for Hero and Naya. Candy was no exception. She’s fine though. Candy has Kendrick, her boyfriend of two years.

“I guess you’re right,” she sighs into the phone.

“Will you be back in time to be at my graduation?”

I stare down at my water bottle on the table, wishing I got something stronger because the guilt is strangling me. But I wouldn’t dare touch the stuff. I refuse to give up control, even to something as temporary as intoxication. “Yeah, isn’t it three months from now? I’ll be there.” She squeals into the phone and I have to hold it away from my ear for my own protection. When she settles down I tell her, “Save me a piece of birthday cake. I’ll be home soon.”

“K. Bye. Oh, wait...Isabel came by today she left you a—”



“Card. Yeah, she never misses a year either. Put it up with my cake. Later, Candy.” I end the call, shoving my mobile back in my pocket. Unimaginable dread fills my entire body on the fourteenth of February of every year. It’s quite ironic that I am born on Valentine’s Day considering my mother didn’t want me at all. I am a gaping error in her existence.

Raking a hand down my face, my eyes dart to a feminine silhouette in a bunny costume. Like me, she doesn’t conceal her identity with a mask, but that’s not what initially drew my attention. It’s the fact that she has denied every guy and girl in here. I can’t help but think she’s looking for a challenge, and with the way I’m feeling, a distraction could be a very productive way to occupy my night in Vegas.

I chug down the water and make my way to her. She gives me a critical once-over, taking in my business casual white shirt and dark trousers and black boots. I had to wear something suitable for my book signing from earlier today. A hoodie and a pair of jeans just wouldn’t make the cut. Or so my agent Stanley tells me. Her dark brown eyes revert back to a Reggie Bush lookalike, who is at the bar with two girls that are practically clawing each other to get to his dick first.

“Sorry, you’re not my type,” she announces, clearly dismissing me.

The rejection actually elicits a smile from me. “I can make you sway. May I sit?”

She shrugs and I slide into the booth right next to her. I take this opportunity to scrutinize the victim of my insatiable desires that will ultimately be played out during the course of tonight.

She anxiously taps her neon-glittered nails on the table, to the beat of her heart.

I'm making her nervous.

This is going great.

"So what's your name?"

"Do you really care?" I say, pushing a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

She shudders and her eyes expand. I notice that she has naturally large eyes; they're doll-like and disarming. She's a looker alright. I let my fingertips glide down her neck, then I draw languid circles on her collarbone. This goes on for a while. I feel her reaction to me and it's all physical. Her breath hitches and she squirms in her seat, pressing her thighs together. My seduction is going very well. "What are your hard limits and safeword?"

"How do you know that I'm even leaving with you?"

I press my lips to her ear, my nose taking in the scent of sweet jasmine. "Because it looks like you're just dying to come. I can promise you that and much more." Closing my eyes, I drag my nose along her soft cheek, nipping the edge of her jaw.

She gasps and attempts to flee, but I embrace her as I would a lover, as would I Isabel, and hold her close to me. I cradle her desperately, like she's the most precious thing to me, like I never want to lose her.

Her erratic heart pounds against my own. This little bunny likes persistence. It's simply a cat and mouse game. I chase the mouse until I snag it by the tail and devour the quivering thing in the end.

"My room or yours?" she whispers.

Smiling, I take her hand and escort her out the club into the corridor that leads to a bank of elevators. This building is efficient severing as a lavish hotel above and kinky nightclub below. We ride the elevator to the very top floor.

I toss off my shirt and push her down on the bed once we're inside my suite. With impatient hands, I strip her of her bunny suit, kissing her hungrily. She smells like a lush garden of fruit. So fucking sweet. It's been a very longtime since I've been inside a woman.

"Wait...wait," she pants between kisses.

I force myself to stop and actually look at her and, for the first time, I notice the remarkable color of her eyes which are a majestic aqua green color with gold flecks. Her midnight blue wavy hair spills over her breasts. The very end of the tips is pastel teal and curls. It's like I captured a fairy. I have to have her. Her beauty is too potent. There's no way I'm letting her go, at least for tonight anyway.

Running my hands down the length of her golden brown skin I ask, "What's wrong?"

"Kissing is a hard limit for me. No kissing. Just fuck me senseless. No making love. No taking it slow. Rough and hard," she whispers to me.

"What's your safeword?"

"Banana."

Smiling deceptively, I nod and peel off both our clothes until she's nude and shaking under me. Staring down at her, I become frustrated with myself. I don't know if it was entirely subconscious or maybe I even did subliminally but this girl has familiar features: Her wide

vivid eyes, her innocent and sweet face, and her ethnicity, which is a concoction of things.

Misery erupts in my chest, spreading at an alarming rate. She cups my face. “Are you okay? You don’t look good. Do you need a moment?”

Instead of answering, I carelessly swat her hands away and reach for a condom inside the nightstand, tearing it open with my teeth. One hand spreads her legs open, the other rolls the condom on. “You’re wet enough,” I growl, thrusting into her.

Her breath hitches each time I dive into her. I don’t hold back anything. I give her all my weight, all my pain, all my strength. She willingly takes everything I have to offer inside of her like she can’t get enough of this shit. Her moans are little breathy gasps...just like Isabel’s. I watch captivated as her pretty eyes transform into glossy and unfocused pleasure orbs. Her internal muscles squeeze the hell out of me. She’s so fucking tight it hurts.

I grip the backs of her soft thighs, driving deeper into her until I hit the bottom of her pussy, then I slow my rhythm until both of our orgasms are dawdling down. I bury my face in the side of her neck and breathe in the essence of who she is: Sweet cotton candy flowers. Our bodies are covered in sleek sweat, both our muscles trembling and begging for relief. The aroma of sex is heavy and intoxicating.

“Faster. Please faster,” she begs, her eyes screwed shut as she shamelessly grinds against my hard dick and attempts to get herself off.

My fingers harshly dig into the flesh of her hips, preventing her movement. She comes when I want her

to, not a second sooner. I stare down at my fingers buried in her skin and smirk. She's going to have a bruise tomorrow. She whimpers and I use her hips to jerk her down on my cock. She groans, and my smirk turns into a full-blown smile.

"Hush. No talking," I say, feeling like my old self again.

She tosses her head back, screwing her pretty eyes closed. She reaches up and her fingers weave throughout my hair, tugging cruelly. Pain spikes through my scalp, shooting straight to my dick.

I press her wrists into the mattress with more force than needed, nipping the edge of her jaw with my teeth. She whispers something too low for me to hear. I look down at this beautiful woman in awe.

She's clueless.

This little fairy of mine has no knowledge of the type of predator she's bedded. The overwhelming desire to destroy her is too powerful to deny. I want to hurt her. The need to spread the misery is unrelenting and consuming. She's going to need to use her safeword.

My nose slides down her cheek. I kiss her softly on the neck. She shivers and opens her eyes with a confused expression. My thrusts are tender and smooth. I pull all the way out before pushing back into her, reaching my shaft.

I release her wrists and explore her tits with my hands, squeezing them and biting and licking her nipples. She keeps shivering. I am now taking my time to actually enjoy this, feeling every part of her body with my hands and cock. She's extremely soft and smells mouthwatering. If I close my eyes, for even the briefest

of seconds, I bet I can imagine Isabel in her place, with her gentle face and her legs wide-open...

“Faster,” she pants.

I go slower, withdrawing my dick and gently pressing into her over and over again. My balls tighten as I feel her pussy grip at me.

But I keep my eyes focused on her with sharp accuracy. I don't want to miss a single thing. I place a palm flat down on her abdomen, gently stroking her stomach. “You feel me in your belly, cutie? I'm not going to stop until you come.”

She narrows her eyes accusingly and begins to grunt, trying her best not to give into the inevitable. She knows what I'm doing. She understands that I am no longer fucking her...the way she wants anyway.

I urge her on with my eyes.

Do it!

Use your safeword because I'm not going to stop until you do!

Her body begins to quiver fiercely. To add salt to injury, I press my lips to her ear and whisper, “You're so damn pretty. If I could, I'd tie you to this bed and fuck you until you could no longer walk. I'd keep you here with me forever. Would you like that? Would you like to be my little fairy?”

She squeezes her eyes shut and half whimpers, half grunts. She comes on me, and that sets off my own orgasm.

I get off on her struggle not to give into me.

How fucked is that?

My mouth covers her trembling lips and I swallow her moans of ecstasy, her moans of distress. They feed

the insatiable monster within me. When I attempt to move, she locks her legs around my waist, bringing me forward and pushing my dick all the way inside of her again.

Ivy stars up at me with shimmering tears in her eyes. My afterglow of nirvana is a bit damped. "I've never been hurt so good," she whispers.

I grin down at her because I fully comprehend what she means. This, by far, might be the most painful thing that she has experienced but it also feels just as good. There is no misinterpretation here.

I hurt her by not fucking her like she wanted, but she liked it.

"You should go. I need to sleep now," I murmur, clearly dismissing her.

Her brows furrow for a moment, briefly displaying the pain I caused before it's masked away. She gives me a small spiteful smile, lovingly running a hand down my face and grips my chin. "You know, you're way too pretty to be that evil," she narrows her eyes to a shrewd and assessing degree. "What's the matter, beautiful boy? Daddy didn't love you enough, or perhaps Mommy didn't." I cringe when she says Mommy. She doesn't miss it. She jerks my chin towards her when I turn my head to avoid her calculating glare. "Was Mommy a whore?"

"Close," I say, smiling though my body is on fire. She found my weak spot. I don't like exposing my weak spots to anyone...except Isabel. This little fairy is going to beat on that spot until it cracks wide-open.

Fuck!

We stare at one another for a while, weighing each other's weaknesses and vulnerability, the air growing thick with sizzling tension. Then she smiles, it's a pure smile with nothing sinister or malicious lurking behind it. "I like you."



## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age seven*

*Isabel age six*

*The hot sun beats down on me as I watch the girl with the pretty eyes and long dark hair swing under the willow tree from where I'm hidden. She swings on a black tire swing, her untied shoelaces on her red sneakers can't touch the ground yet. She swings by herself. She looks lonely and sad. I could swing with her or push her so she can go faster. Maybe that would put a smile on her face.*

*I want to see her smile.*

*She doesn't look like she smiles a lot.*

*But Mama will be looking for me if I stay longer.*

*I can't do it.*

*I don't want Mama to know I'm here with Isabel, but I don't want to leave Isabel either. She needs me to protect her from my mama and I need her to keep me safe from the scary stuff in my life. I'm not scared when I think of Isabel, the girl in the pictures my mama keeps locked in her office.*

*The pretty girl named Isabel.*

*Isabel.*

*That's what her mom calls her.*

*Isabel.*

*So pretty.*

*She's the prettiest girl I've ever saw.*

*She makes me feel weird.*

*It's good weird.*

*I like this weird.*

*It feels better than the scary feeling Mama gives me.*

*It feels way better than that. I think I'll keep her. Isabel is going to be mine. I don't want her with anyone else.*

*She's good for me. I don't have a lot of good in my life, besides my brother and sister and Grandpa Charlie, Isabel is all the good I will ever need.*

*Picking up a smooth stone from the stream, I toss it in my hand and turn back to the main road.*

*I'm gonna talk to her soon.*

*But not today.*

*I can't wait to tell Isabel she's mine and no one else's.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Beware*

It's been three months since my trip to Vegas. My night with Ivy has developed into a full-blown relationship. What we have is not a typical romance, though. Ivy has a girlfriend, Blue, who she sincerely adores. Blue is a cruel and coldhearted little devil when it comes to me. She doesn't exactly like me. I guess I am the middle man here. Blue's hatred for me has little effect on me and Ivy's relationship. We both provide each other with a continual supply of lust and anguish. I'm not proud of the man I am today, but my pride has very little to with my desire.

Fixing my tie, I watch intently as Ivy glides lacy black stockings over her toned legs. Raw carnal desire happens when a man can leisurely watch a woman get ready in the mirror. When a woman puts on her heels, applies her lipstick to her lips, and sprays sweet perfume to her neck and then fluffs out her hair, we, as men, are never hungrier. The yearning has never felt more alive and palpable. I always thought that women were created to be enjoyed and consumed. They are just so beautiful, soft, and breakable...

I try to adjust my aching hard-on in my trousers, but when Ivy lifts her glittering eyes in the mirror and gives me a lascivious wink, my willpower crumbles.

Making my way to her, I throw Ivy over my shoulder caveman-style and pause by the dresser to snatch up a condom from the glass bowl that holds an abundant amount.

“We’re going to be late, Hunter,” Ivy whispers breathlessly. “We promised Candy.”

The sadistic impulse to sink my teeth into the side of her hip is too irresistible to deny. She whimpers and kicks her legs wildly in the air. I slap her thigh. “Shhh. No talking. You’re ruining my fantasy.”

I toss her down on my bed. Her long hair is sprawled all over the place; it’s like a large river with smaller rivulets of dark blue. My hands grip her knees and spread her legs apart. She gazes up at me, blushing and biting her finger. I run my cheek in the inside of her thigh. It’s nothing like the feel of lace against your face. My nostrils flare as I breathe in her arousal.

Yeah, we’re going to be late.

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Smiling, I clap when Candy’s name is announced and she walks across the stage in her white cap and gown, accepting her nursing diploma that she has worked her ass off to get. At least I didn’t miss this part of the commencement. Candy turns to the crowd and excitedly jumps up and down once she receives it, her red locks flying all over the place. Everyone laughs and whistles. I return to playing a game on my phone until the last name is announced. Isabel Waters. My head lifts and my eyes dart to her. She smiles shyly as she walks across the stage. There are more whistles and applause.

Isabel's cheeks are a deep shade of red as she accepts her certificate and shakes hands with the administrator of the nursing college. She gives the crowd a sheepish wave. I hear Falcon's booming voice somewhere in the distance, but nothing in this moment is louder than my thundering heart.

I didn't know Isabel attended nursing school. I guess I didn't want to know. It's been three years since I've last had any communication with her...

Ivy gives my hand a squeeze. I notice that we are the only ones left seated. The ceremony is over. Everyone is huddle with family and friends but most are exiting the stadium. "Is that the one... your Isabel?" I give her hand a returning squeeze. "God, Hunter, she's gorgeous." I hear the wonder in her voice. Yes, Isabel's beauty is infectious.

"Well lookie here... If it isn't the devil himself." Harmony says with a smug smirk on her face. I'm about to say something harsh when I take in her stomach ballooning from her golden dress. She's pregnant. A diamond cut in so many facets spits rainbows across my face from her ring finger. She's married too.

I smile and rub the stubble on my chin. "Looks like a congratulations is due."

She shrugs, patting her belly. "Four months along."

"Boy or girl?" Ivy asks, smiling kindly at her.

"Girl," Falcon says, tugging a protective arm around Harmony's waist and pulling her close to his side.

Falcon's married to Harmony of all people?!

"She's going to be the princess of Cherry Creek," Victor adds, placing his hands on her swollen belly. He wears all red with his signature red sequins shoes and

sunglasses. His style is a bit outlandish for me, but it works wonders for him and, apparently, has made Victor the top international designer in the world.

“Oh my God... it’s Victor Sanchez. The Victor Sanchez,” Ivy breathes. He must be a big deal because Ivy doesn’t go into fan-mode often considering she’s a famous artist herself.

Victor immediately takes her hand. “Pleasure. You are...?”

“Ivy Rivers and the pleasure is all mine,” she shakes his hand over esthetically, then turns to whisper to me while still vigorously shaking his hand, “I can’t believe this is happening right now.”

“Believe it, Tinker. You’re about to tear his hand off. I figure that his hand is essential to what he does and he’s going to need back,” I reply. She instantly drops his hand and murmurs an apology.

“Ivy Rivers... the painter. I thought you looked familiar,” Falcon says. “We have several pieces of yours.”

“That’s such an honor.”

“So are you guys all married now?” I ask, breaking their gushing moment.

Harmony smiles at Falcon and then at Victor, they all grin at each other like they’ve got a secret inside joke. “Yeah, it works for us. We’re happy,” Falcon says, intensely staring at Harmony and Victor. I witness the true happiness and light in his eyes.

I’m envious of it...

“You made it!” Candy smashes into me with full force, her ass landing in my lap. I have to dig my heels into the floor to keep us from collapsing. She wraps her

arms around my neck, raining red sweet kisses all over on my face.

“Hey to you too, Candy,” I say through a smile, gripping her tighter.

Her kisses slow and eventually stop. Her glossy green eyes drift down to mine. “I’ve missed you.”

My heart twists a little. “I’ve missed you, too.” Someone clears their throat. I look up and Isabel’s eyes penetrate right through to my soul. She stands there in all white like Candy, but I can’t decide if Isabel is God’s creation or Satan’s angel. The strong shiver that ripples over my body and makes every muscle tremble takes my breath away. It’s like a mini earthquake occurring inside of me.

In her eyes I see a reflection of my own desperate emotions: The longing, the love, the hate, the pain, the betrayal, the appealing nature to rip each other apart before we put each other back together piece by piece. I suddenly have a compelling urge to fuck and choke her to death simultaneously.

My heart twists further more.

My arms drop and Candy is off me. Before I can process anything, I’m on my feet, glaring down at her. We stand off in a silent battle. Her hazel-green eyes roam over my face, then she gives me a tiny smirk like she knows exactly what she does to me. “Hunter.”

My hand flies to the back of her neck and I push her forehead to mine, forcing her to stand on the tips of her toes. She moans. It’s low and barely audible, but I heard it. I give her neck a tight squeeze. She closes her eyes as her lips part. I don’t shut my eyes, though. I keep them open, intently staring down at her closed eyelids as if I

could somehow infiltrate and enter her mind and read her thoughts.

I love you, I want to tell her.

Do you have any idea how much I love you?

No one will ever love you like I do.

No one.

Time seems to stop until she whispers, “You left me.”

I press her body closer into mine instead of responding.

She begins to quiver.

I feel the muted sob building in her chest. Cupping the back of her head, I push her face into my chest where no one can witness her shed tears for me. I provide her with the shield of my body; she can use me as a sanctuary. I’ll take whatever I can get from Isabel, including her tears. Everything fades away so easily when I’m with her and that scares the shit out of me.

I’m unaware how long we hold each other; everything falls back into place when I feel a gentle tug on my arm. “Introduce me, Hunter.” Ivy’s soft voice breaks the illusion. I release Isabel and we both take a step back. Isabel looks at Ivy and stretches out her hand, smiling genuinely. “Hi, I’m Isabel.”

Ivy is quick to take her hand. “I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Ivy.”

Her smile broadens. “We look alike.”

“Yeah, and our names both start with an ‘I.’ How insane is that?”

“He has a type,” Isabel whispers and they stop shaking hands and erupt in girly giggles. I guess this is girl code to accepting each other, but I can’t take my



gaze away from Isabel's puffy eyes. I wonder can everyone else see the damage her tears caused...or do I not let anything get past me when it comes to Isabel?

Max saunters over to Isabel's side, grimacing at me. His dislike for me is veiled with a tolerable yet sulky smile. "Hunter, you're back in town," he says, wrapping an arm around Isabel's shoulders, pulling her close to his side.

"You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen," Ivy whispers to him.

His smile gentles when it's aimed at her. "Thanks. I like your hair." Ivy squeals and I roll my eyes. "We're having a celebratory dinner at Isabel's house you should all come."

"We'd love to but we are here for Candy," I reply.

"I could eat," Candy says.

"Yeah, I'm down," Kendrick adds, smiling at her.

Damn.

I try to mentally prepare myself the best I can because I have to keep this I've-moved-on-and-everything's-fine façade. If I don't, then this man of granite will disintegrate into nothing.

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"...that's amazing. You're insanely talented," Max says to Ivy as he and Isabel Google her artwork and virtual gallery online. I haven't been attentive to their conversation though. Isabel has been shooting me deadly eye daggers all night. She even manages to kick me—with her boots off—a few times under the table.

I don't know why she's suddenly pissed at me, but I can't stop myself from smiling. Isabel has forgotten about my 'no hitting' rule, or perhaps it's the liquid courage that's making her so bold. I want to remind her, though. I want to remind her badly. But she isn't mine to reprimand. Isabel isn't mine to punish. Her anger is feeding and fuelling something sinister within me, something that is barely contained, and something dark that is scratching at the surface for an opportunity to unleash its wrath on Isabel.

My entire body heats from the inside out, my dick hardening. Rage and sex goes hand in hand with me. I try and fail to think about anything that will calm me down.

The tines of my metal fork scrape noisily against the porcelain plate as I stab a piece of meatloaf. The meal that we are served is homemade: Fresh green beans, garlic roasted potatoes, yeast rolls, and meatloaf. Isabel is profoundly proud of herself for cooking everything. I find this odd for two reasons. The first, it is Isabel's day. Why did she cook when she's supposed to be catered to? The second, Isabel doesn't cook.

Or maybe this new Isabel does.

I don't know.

It has been three years since I've had any communication with her.

Long gone is the unsure Isabel that only wore Converses and jeans. She has evolved into a classy woman that now wears elegant dresses and heels. I vaguely wonder if Max inspired such a transformation.

Candy leans in to whisper, "You're not eating much, Gummy. Are you feeling okay?"

“The meatloaf is overcooked,” I declare, making the effort to hold Isabel’s glare the entire time.

Everyone stares at me, calling me an asshole in their own silent way until Ivy changes the topic for my sake—something about a trip to Paris.

I vaguely wonder if anyone noticed that I have yet to touch my full wineglass. It’s too late for that now. Picking up the stem of my glass, I excuse myself from the table and wander to Isabel’s bedroom, shutting the door once I’m in. Her bedroom is still the same. She probably doesn’t spend much time in here. It’s a haven for me.

Standing by the bay window, I stare down at the glistening glow of the full moon on the surface of blood-red wine. I inhale the tartness of it and place it on her dresser. I wish I did have the ability to drown in the stuff...

The door creaks open, the golden light from the hall filtering through the crack. “Hunter?” I don’t answer Isabel’s call. My eyes lift back up to the moon. She stumbles in and shuts the door. Her hands rest on the backs of my shoulders, drawing her closer to me. I want to shake them off. But the feel of her warm hands is too pleasurable against my body. I’ve missed them there.

“What do you want, Isabel?”

She presses her face into my back and I have to take in a sharp breath when her lips skim me there. I feel how soft her mouth is through the fabric of my shirt. I never had those lips wrapped around my cock...

“I don’t know. I saw you leave.”

“It’s kind of difficult to play nice when your fiancé isn’t shy of his fondness for you. Do you have any idea

what you're putting me through? I don't think you even care."

She wraps her arms around my back, pushing her perky tits fully into me. What I'd give to touch them and have them in my mouth again. "I do care. Don't say stuff like that."

"Well—" I abruptly turn around, holding both of her wrists behind her back in one of my hands "—don't do stuff like this. What are you playing at?"

Her lips part as she stares up at me. Our breathing turns ragged and my heart is pounding in my ears. Her wide eyes take on that glazed look and, fuck me, it registers right to my dick. She's completely turned-on right now. When she strains to reach for me, I use more force to keep her wrists secured. Our bodies constantly rub against each other's in a battle of wills. Things escalate from there. Her fingers are in my hair. My tongue is deep in her mouth. I can't tell who lost first. Everything seems to happen simultaneously. Her lips taste rich and tart and sweet. I'm drunk off them already. I bite at her cushiony lips, sucking and licking them, relishing at her breathy moans. The more of herself she offers, the more I take. I take and take and take, never reaching the point of saturation.

I'll never have enough of her.

Women make men stupid.

With one kiss... you own us.

Only when I shove her down on the bed and hastily undo my belt buckle, do I come to my senses. What the hell am I doing? Oh, I know! I am about to fuck a drunk and engaged Isabel while her husband-to-be is freely chatting away with my girlfriend at Isabel's dining room

table. I blow out a frustrated breath and rake a hand over my face.

This can't be happening.

“Why'd you stop?” she asks, giggling softly.

I want to demand her to leave him, to come back to me, and fuck her until her pussy molds to the shape of my cock. But I don't. I will not expose my soul and have it ripped apart by her again. I took that chance already and it broke my heart. I take my time as my eyes roam over her body. Her black hair tousled and spilling down her shoulders, her dark green dress bunched up at her hips, her black lace panties peeking between the splinter of space between her partly opened thighs. God, I have missed her body. When I look back up at her face, I realize she's asleep. Isabel had to drink herself silly to get through dinner with me.

Feeling guilty, I smooth her dress down her hips and cover her with a blanket, then I lean forward to place a kiss on her cheek. I leave immediately after that because seeing Isabel in such a vulnerable state is too tempting when I can just run off with her.

I thank Max for inviting us to dinner and hold Ivy's hand tight in mine. Candy and her boyfriend follow us out. I hug Candy goodbye and tell her how proud I am of her. When I get home I fuck Ivy until we are both debilitated and sated, then fall asleep with Isabel's sweet flavor in my mouth.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Blue's Precious Gem*

It's been a week since that disastrous dinner. I haven't had any contact with Isabel, which is a good thing. I haven't been able to concentrate on my writing, though. I've been stuck on the sentence for an half an hour now, just staring at the blinking cursor:

*Lucy crumpled into bits when her eyes landed on Ford Pittman. She swept silky raven-colored hair behind her ears that escaped from her ponytail and tugged down the navy baseball cap on her head, feeling underdressed in her gray sweatpants and sweatshirt.*

*Jesus, she thought.*

*I wished I picked a better outfit to grocery shop in.*

*Ten years had passed since she last saw him. She was a timid senior in high school when they were together. Lucy, a now powerful woman of a fortune five hundred company, took concealment behind a large display of Power Bars as Ford paused at an aisle near her.*

*Her ego rather shrunk quickly when she noticed Ford. Father Time had been more merciful towards him than her, she thought. At twenty-seven Lucy was aging quite gracefully. But if you told her, she'd deny it.*

*A few laugh lines around her eyes and mouth were the only evidence time existed past her twenty-first birthday. But Ford managed to wear his seniority with pride. It was as if he almost flaunted it. He was dressed just as casually in a cotton T-shirt and workout shorts. Lucy noticed everything about Ford. Like the way he bit his lip when deciding between which pertain powder to pick.*

*Old habits die hard, she thought.*

*Something shiny on his finger winked at her. She sighed inwardly and stood on the tips of her toes to see Ford's ring finger. She wanted to know if he was married or not. But as soon as his naked ring finger came into to view, she collapsed into the mountain of Power Bars. Boxes fell down like dominoes and it seemed as if the entire store stopped just to take in the train wreck that was her. Lucy was humiliated when Ford offered her a helping hand. Her bronze skin flushed a deep red and she refused his hand. Lucy gathered her composure and swiftly stood on her feet. Ford continued to hold out his hand in a kind gesture but she stared down at his welcoming palm in disgust. She pulled the fallen straps of her purse back on her shoulder and said...*

What?

What did she say?

Ivy walks through the door of my study with paint splattered all over her tattered denim overalls and apron. She runs her stained fingers through my hair, looking over my shoulder at my laptop screen, at the one sentence that I can't seem to finish. When I'm in writer-mode I get aggravated easily. I abruptly shut the laptop and turn to face her.

"Yes, dear?" I say sarcastically.

Her fingers massage my scalp. "Don't be so cranky, Hunter. I just wanted to let you know I'm about to pick up Blue from the airport. We're having pizza tonight. Do you want anything special?"

"Nope. I'm good, Tinker." I can be such a dick sometimes. "Just you," I add.

She gives me a megawatt smile and leans in to kiss me before she leaves. I decide to take a relaxing scalding shower to prepare myself for Blue. I need all the tranquil time I can get before she shakes up my world and spins it on its head.

It's ten thirty-five when Ivy and Blue make their way through my front door with a stack of pizza boxes and plastic grocery bags. Blue kicks off her leather boots and drops her black cat, Berry, on the floor and heads into the kitchen after Ivy. She doesn't acknowledge me with a simple greeting or even the briefest of looks. After all the times this has occurred, I don't understand why this time bothers me more. Blue never acknowledges me. And I ponder on it. She gets under my skin when she blatantly and blithely disrespects me in my home, in a place I consider sacred.

With arms crossed at my chest, I lean in the entryway of the kitchen and watch as Ivy and Blue stack the fridge with beer and variety of alcoholic drinks. Blue pops open a can and slurps it down while eyeing me with open curiosity and unapologetic abhorrence. She's a Ukrainian supermodel almost as tall as me. Her stark blue eyes are a deep contrast against her golden skin and charcoal-colored hair. She doesn't fool me, though. Underneath that blinding beauty is a vigilant, soundless, stealthy assassin.

Danger recognizes danger.

"Little town you live in, Hunter. No paparazzi. This is good," Blue says, her gaze extremely watchful over the can of beer. Her ascent is thick but I've come to understand it.

"Yes. You're free do as you like and no one will ever find out. But this is a big change from New York. You might come to miss getting your picture snapped while you walk to Starbucks," I say.

She glances at Ivy, who is opening a box of pepperoni pizza. "I will sacrifice anything to be with my



love.” Like Isabel, I have to read between the lines when dealing with Blue. Blue can be a sarcastic little shit. Before Ivy begins to eat her pizza, Blue stops her and removes all the greasy pepperonis. “Never eat American meat. Gives you cancer. Nasty Americans put weird things in meat.”

Ivy shrugs and eats her slice of pizza. “She’s probably right. My mom said she went vegan because she read an article that said fast-food places use horse meat with all kinds of fillers instead of real beef.”

“I don’t know. I like my meat and I like my burgers,” I declare.

Blue’s eyes dart to me and she smirks cruelly. “Of course you do, Hunter. American boy devours his American meat. There is nothing new about this.”

I doubt that she has just given me a compliment. “Shouldn’t you be drinking water? Beer makes you bloated. You’re a model, right?”

Low blow.

I know this.

I’d never criticize a real woman on her body or weight.

But if you know me as well as you think you do, then you know I don’t give a fuck when it comes to hurting Blue’s feelings.

She shoots me an evil look, then deliberately cracks open another can and drains the life out of it. “How is your writing, Hunter? Ivy told me that you are having trouble... writer’s block. What is holding you back?” I lift a challenging brow and Blue narrows her eyes. Right then and there I know she’s about to go in for the kill. “Is

it because your love loves another, or maybe because Mommy Dearest kept you in the dark—”

“Blue,” Ivy admonishes sharply.

Ivy told Blue about my horrifying childhood and about Isabel. She probably needed someone to vent to after I laid all my baggage on her. This comes to no surprise. Blue’s going to use it against me each and every opportunity she has. I don’t blame her though. If I knew any personal information about her, I’d drill it into her ass and make sure she never forgets.

Instead of fuelling her fire, I shrug indifferently. “I don’t know it could be both.”

Ivy runs a hand down my heated face and gives me a quick peck on the lips. “I’m so sorry, Hunter.”

I smile down at her. “It’s okay.”

She shakes her head. “No it’s not. I shouldn’t have told her. I’m sorry.”

Blue groans, picking up a bottle of vodka and a box of pizza. “I’m spent. I’m going upstairs.” My lips curl as I watch her skeleton frame leisurely walk up the stairway.

My phone rings. I retrieve it from my pocket and glance down at the name and my finger slides across the screen, then I hold it to my ear. “Hero. It’s been a while.”

“Can you come and pick me up?”

“Where are you?”

“In front of Luck’s.”

“Have you been drinking?” Without another word the phone disconnects.

Twenty minutes later I’m parked in front of Luck’s wooden shack of a bar. The dirt lot is full of bikers and

motorcycles. Hero is nowhere in sight. Grabbing my .45 from the glove compartment, I shove it within the waistband of the back my jeans. I'm not opposed to blowing holes in things, but if the night ends without me shooting up half the bar I would definitely give thanks to St. Peter.

Breathing evenly, I make my way inside the dimly lit bar and I'm quickly greeted with cigarette smoke and stale urine wafting from the fifthly bathrooms. Immediately I note that there are way too many grim, gruff bikers and not a lot of biker babes to equal out the equation. I spot Hero in the corner of the bar by the pool table. An overly muscled biker has him lifted by the collar of his shirt and pressed into the wall. I sigh and rub my temples. I didn't imagine my night would end with me confronting Hulk Hogan on steroids.

I display my most charming and biting smile.  
“Gentlemen.”

“Hunter, 'bout time you made it. Tell these fuckers to let me go,” Hero mumbles through a bloody grin and split lip.

“This *fucker* here owes me money,” Hulk says, continually jerking my brother by his collar.

“Let him go,” I say.

He lifts a sardonic brow. “I'll let him go when I get my damn money.”

A red-hot fiery heat surges through my body. It's been too long since I've been a fight. “Right. You have about five seconds to let him go. If not, you'll be paid with a bullet instead of cash.”

He stares at me, his mouth tilting up. I don't understand why he's grinning when my face is cold hard

stone. I'm actually looking for a reason to pull out my gun, and this would be a suitable one.

Other bikers cluster around us, ready for the signal to jump me. The head honcho releases Hero, who stumbles backward. He's absurdly drunk.

"Wait for me in the truck," I snarl at Hero.

Complying, he coolly strolls out the door like he isn't surrounded by a gang of brutal bikers who aren't eager to kick our preppy-looking asses. I blame my blue eyes and blond hair for people not taking me as serious as they should.

"How much?"

"Four."

I pull out my wallet. "Four hundred?"

His shit-eating grin broadens. "Four grand."

I glance at the ATM with an out-of-order sticker slapped across the busted screen and back to him. "Do you take checks?"

His taunting eyes run the length of my body. "You seem good for it, pretty boy."

After writing a check out to Nancy Smith, I walk to my truck where Hero stands by the passenger door, feet crossed in the dirt, head down, and smoking a joint. Wisps of thick ghostly white smoke curl around him, obscuring his face from my sight. I snatch the weed from his hands and toss the cigar somewhere behind me, gingerly lifting his blood-splattered face towards the moonlight to get a better look.

Hero's infuriated blue eyes meet mine. "What the fuck?"

"Hold still. Is anything broken?"

He angrily slaps my hands away. “Fuck no. Take me home. I’m tired and hungry.”

When we’re halfway home, I take in the appearance of my battered little brother and his bloody clothes. I’m doing one hell of a job taking care of him.

When the house is quiet, I leave out and take a very long night run.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Past*

*Hunter age eight*

*The broom stick lands across my bare back as I hug my bedpost that my tied arms have no other choice but to hug. It hurts every time the wooden broom handle strikes my back in a fiery heat of blaze.*

*“Do you still love her,” Grace asks.*

*“Forever,” I whisper through the blood in my mouth.*

*“Wrong answer!” she hits me again.*

*Tears flow down my cheeks and drip from my chin. Hero and Naya scream somewhere in the background.*

*Grace makes them watch.*

*She always makes them watch.*

*Mother thinks she can use their screams as motivation to change my answer.*

*To change my mind.*

*I squeeze my eyes shut to block out the pain and the screams.*

*It doesn't help.*

*“Do you love her?” she asks again.*

*I take a deep breath through my burning tears and hiccups to answer, “Forever.”*

*The broom handle comes crashing down on my back and I howl out in pain. Their screams get louder.*

*I sag into the pool, gasping for breath.  
My back is torn open and bleeding.  
She can kill me.  
I'm never going to change my answer.  
Not ever.  
"Tell me what I want to hear. Do you still love,  
Isabel?"  
"Forever."  
She hits me again and again and again.  
I keep my eyes closed tight and begin to float away  
where Isabel's touch can reach me.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Hero*

I didn't tell Hunter thank you. It's not like he's exactly hurting after giving away four grand. I bet he didn't even blink when he paid that overgrown ape. But still. Hunter has been cleaning up after me for way too long now. The only successful thing I've accomplished in the past three years was graduating high school and burning everything that was beautiful in my life to ash. Naya has her own lucrative jewelry line and is on tour with Lark, who has now become a rock god. Hunter is a famous author with tons of followers—studio executives are in movie talks with him about making his books into movies. Taylor and Rex got married in Greece last summer. I am nothing. Taylor even found her mother a few months back. Unlike all of them, I have no achievements to showoff, no stories to tell.

Laughing for a reason unknown to me, I make my way down the stairs, almost tumbling down the last five. The floor seems to take sudden dips and it's like the world is intentionally spinning faster just throw me off balance.

Bracing myself on the wall, I blindly feel my way to the kitchen. It's so fucking dark in here and I'm still drunk. This is cause for disaster.



I flip the light switch on and Isabel two point O scares the hell out of me. I even yelp and jump like a ten-year-old girl witnessing a bum pissing on the street corner for the first time. Gripping the edges of the table, I force myself to take deep sustaining breaths.

I need to calm down.

“Are you okay? I didn’t mean to startle you.” She places her hands on my heaving back.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” I use more strength than needed when I shove her away. She goes flying across the room and lands on the floor, hitting her head on the sharp edge of the oven. Her hand shoots to the back of her head and when she removes her fingers, they’re covered with dark blood.

Praying she doesn’t scream, I crouch in front of her and clap my sweaty palm over her mouth. “Shh. Don’t wake Hunter.”

She says something but it’s muffled by my hand.

I grip her mouth harder, urging her to be quiet. There’s not a lot I fear now, but Hunter is the exception when it comes to things I’m terrified of pissing off. Something wet drizzles down my knuckles. Tears. She’s crying. I think I’m gripping her mouth too hard. I instantly drop my hand. She hastily stands, harshly wiping the glistening tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

“I don’t know what you’re on, Hero, but you need to get your shit together.” She sharply turns on her heels and jolts out of sight.

Lifting myself from the floor, I open the fridge and take out a bottle of wine to drown my sorrows in and a half eaten box of leftover pizza from the counter. Once I

reach my room, I slam the door shut and make a nice picnic on my bed. Though, my life is definitely no picnic. I glance at the glowing red numbers that are displayed on the digital clock that rests on my dresser.

*What the hell was she doing in the kitchen at 3:00 A.M. anyway?*

The wine flows until I throw up. Luckily, I make it to the toilet in time when the vile pours out of me. I have to clutch the toilet with effort when I start to violently dry heave. Pizza doesn't taste as appetizing coming back up, nothing really ever does.

After rinsing my mouth out in the sink, I paw through piles of soiled jeans on my floor. Then I find the object of my desire in the pocket of pants I wore three days ago. Tranquilizers that will help me escape this world. The sleep is temporary but the rest is well worth it.

I lie in bed laughing at anime after I gulp down six pills with hefty gulps of wine. My body is getting immune to the drug's effects. So I have to up the dosage. Two tranquilizers used to knock me out like the dead. Not so much anymore.

I watch the anime *Gantz* play out on the screen, thinking how the fuck did I end up to be the joke of the town. Between laughing and watching TV, I fall into oblivion.

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The sharp edge of something cold pierces the skin on the side of my neck. Stickiness trickles down my collarbone, wetting my shirt that now clings to me. I don't feel pain, in fact, I don't feel anything. My instincts are alert and telling me that I'm in danger yet my body isn't aware of anything but the drugs pumping through my veins, keeping my limbs lethargic and heavy.

A hand cruelly slaps me across the face, turning my head sharply to the side. I find myself waiting for the agonizing burning sting to spread but it never comes. My tormenter supplies me with a current of smacks until my eyes water.

Forcing my lids to open, I stare at a devilish angel with glowing eyes the color of glacial ice and locks darker than coal. I've finally done it. I've managed to die and this Angel of Death has come to collect my soul. I won't be seeing Tyler and the pearly gates of heaven. I'm going to hell. I've known this for a while now. It's such an appropriate place for me...just where I belong.

The Angel of Death straddles me as she holds a silver blade to my neck and searches my eyes for something. "What are you waiting for? Take me. I'm ready."

"Ready to die so soon?" She forces the dagger deeper into my skin.

I inhale sharply, taking in the thick metallic scent of blood. My blood. "Yes," I answer through gritted teeth. "I've had enough."

"Touch Ivy again and you will."

My brows furrow. "What?"

She drags the blade down the length of my body and jams it under my balls, the razor-sharp tip grazing me there. I hiss from the burning pain and she laughs. "You heard me, little boy." She glances down and lifts the waistband of my boxers to peek inside. "You're hard. Does pain get you off, little masochistic whore?"

I realize that this is no angel but Blue, a Ukrainian demon from hell. I try to shake her off but my muscles are too sluggish and don't move at my command. "Get the fuck off me."

"I will, but I should make you come first? No?"

Horror washes over my face and does not go unnoticed by her. She feeds off the despair she's causing me. Blue gets high off my misery.

She wraps a warm hand around my pulsing cock and squeezes. The high level of dread I'm experiencing is slowly ebbing away at the drug. My muscles pull together and tighten in my abdomen. The sensation of pleasure and pain is stronger than before. There's this feeling I get when my eyes water and burn and my bottom lip trembles as I struggle to hold on before my pride and dignity go right out the window and the tears begin to flow.

Well, I'm there.

"Please don't. I'm sorry."

Her hand steadily pumps me as she smiles down evilly. Blue is a cruel little bitch. "I don't know if you are yet, but you will be." This is not Blue's first time torturing me. Blue and I have been left alone together on many occasions. What I thought was friendly flirting on her end was simply her gaining information and learning how to take advantage of me to prolong my suffering.

When she has an open opportunity to torment me, she relishes in it. She knows all my weaknesses at this point. Blue knows exactly where my cracks are hidden and she lives to press on them until she fucking shatters me.

This is no angel.

Blue is Satan's spawn.

I screw my eyes shut and grit my teeth, trying my best not to give in to the welcoming inevitable.

She places her soft lips on my ear. "Did I ever tell you how much I appreciate you, beautiful Hero? I really do... Will I be a fool to call it love?"

My lips part, my dick swelling within the harsh grip of her hand. She has clever fingers and a sharp mind. What makes this situation more humiliating is that Blue is pressing the blade to my open wound on my neck while continuously stroking me. Sugary words and brutal actions are Blue's tools to expose and exploit my vulnerability to humiliate me.

I hate it but my fucking body can't get enough of this shit. Pain, humiliation with flowery words laced with venom seems to be my undoing that Blue takes pleasure in exploiting. If I knew she was here, I wouldn't have taken more of those tranquilizers. I am always on guard when she's around.

"My sweet boy. How I love you so."

At her words I come harder than I ever have. My eyes lose focus and my vision blurs. Warm wetness splatters across my stomach as she holds me down absorbing the aftershocks of my orgasm, feasting from them. Everything from the stickiness on my abdomen to the wetness on my shirt just feels wrong.

Blue bends her head down and licks up the mess on my stomach, lapping my semen up like thirsty dog. I groan in frustration. She sniggers and skims her lips over mine, so I can taste myself on them. Blue places the blade in the waistband of her boy shorts and grabs something off the stand. I close my eyes and turn my head. I feel tried, used, and useless. Is this how women feel after being abused and violated? If they do, I understand their struggle now.

A small hand clamps around my jaw, fingers biting into my skin. I jerk from her but she manages to capture my chin again. “Stay still. I’ll heal you now.” She applies some kind of wet adhesive to my bleeding wound. The blood stops and the gash feels like it is sealing closed.

Liquid stitches maybe?

Who is the crazy lesbian Ukrainian bitch?

“We have an understanding now. Yes?”

I grit my teeth and force an answer out. “Yes.”

“I had to give Ivy stitches too. She hurts, you hurt far worse.” She strokes my hair as if I’m her beloved pet cat. “I love hurting you.” I want recoil from her touch but refuse in doing so. “Where I come from pretty boys like you suck big cocks when they misbehave. Fuck up again, I will have a *real* cock for you to praise with your mouth. Understood?”

“Yes.”

She brushes her lips over mine once more and merrily hops off the bed, whistling a tune I now hate. I knew when I first saw Blue, we were either going to love each other or hate one another with nothing in-between.

It’s more than safe to say that I fucking hate her.

When I open my eyes, I look down at myself in total disgust. I'm covered in my own blood and semen. My life is a fucking mess. How I'm still breathing is miracle only God knows.

After a while of blankly looking at the ceiling with murderous thoughts of the many ways I can strangle Blue, big round glowing eyes stare back at me. Berry. Retaliation is a must.

After a warm shower I take more pills and fall back to sleep with a silly smile on my face, cuddling Berry in my arms.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Hunter

#### *A Sight To Behold*

Tonight Hero is throwing a small party at the house; he's even preparing dinner and grilling. This is a huge turnaround for him. I feel like a proud father as I watch him from inside my house. Hero whistles a tune and flips sizzling patties on the grill that's on patio by the pool.

Ivy presses her front to my back, wrapping her arms around my midsection. "He'll get there, Hunter. He just needs more time."

"I know. I wish I could eat his misery. He's been through a lot to be so young."

Her slender fingers run through my hair, massaging my scalp. "So have you."

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The house is now filled with half of Cherry Creek. The young and old along with everyone in-between occupy every space. Ear-shattering hip-hop music blares from all over. Discarded plastic cups litter every surface. A bunch of people are in the pool playing water sports, making out and smoking, doing little to no swimming.



I glance around and have a sudden flare of panic. My clean house is in the process of being vandalized. The unrelenting urge to pick up trash and wipe down and disinfect surfaces is a strong one. I can't tolerate living in filth or being immersed in it for very long. The origin of my OCD traits dates back to being forced to live with my own waste when I was imprisoned in a cramped cage as a child. Clean and organized is practical and is easy to understand. Chaos and filth is difficult to analyze and assess. Terrifying things lurk within a world of grime...

Hero calls everyone over to the small square-shaped wrought-iron table on patio by the sliding glass doors. Blue sits at the head of the table in her shimmering black and gold designer bikini, puffing on a cigarette and knocking back a beer while stuffing her face with salty chips. I guess when she isn't modeling she can splurge on the finer things in life.

"I've made a special dessert for my beautiful friend, Blue. Don't you all think she's the hottest thing you've ever seen?" The crowd erupts in loud hollers and whistles. I cross my arms at my chest, bracing for something. I just don't know what it is. A girl with red glowing heart-shaped sunglasses brings out a dish covered with a metal cloche lid and places it in front Blue. When she tries to open it, Hero places a firm hand on top of hers, effectively bringing her to an abrupt halt. He looks down at her and smiles a smile laced with malice. "I just want you to know that I've put my heart into that and thought about you the entire time I made it. I made quite a mess in the process, but the end result was well-worth it. So please, enjoy."

Blue lifts the top off the dish and some people scream while others laugh. A teen girl with pigtails gags and pukes all over my potted geraniums. It is Berry's bloody head served on a platter. Hero slaughtered a poor kitty for a reason unknown to me, because it sure as hell doesn't upset Blue.

She barely blinks.

"Well done, Hero," Blue says. She stabs the brilliant cherry of her cigarette out on Berry's discolored tongue that hangs limply out from his mouth. "I've been thinking about this for a while now, Hero. I'm going to give my agency in Paris a call. I think you're modeling material. Would you like that?"

He gives her a suspicious look and then grins massively. "I would love it."

I don't know what these two are playing at, but I am grateful Ivy is in the house, so she doesn't have to witness a beheaded Berry. She loved that cat.

"Enough, Hero. Get that shit off my table!"

His stark blue eyes dart to mine. "Okay. Cool it, Hunter," he mouths, giving his head a slight shake. I've come to realize that this wasn't a party at all...just some kind of incontrovertible declaration that Hero isn't tolerating Blue's cruel ridicule anymore.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age nine*

*Isabel age eight*

*Isabel and I sit around her square oak table in her kitchen, watching her mom make a handmade cherry pie from scratch. Isabel puts her elbows on the table and I pinch her thigh hard enough she winces.*

*Her pretty brown-green eyes look at me. She frowns at me. "What was that for?"*

*Shrugging, I watch her mom as she lays a sheet of dough over the red cherry filling and begins to pinch the dough closed around the rim. "My mom pinches us when we put our elbows on the dinner table. She says it's rude and disrespectful."*

*Isabel's lips purse. "Well, you're mom isn't here."*

*"Yeah, but you are." I pinch her thigh again and she shoves my shoulder. I have to hold on to the edge of the table to catch myself. She almost knocks me out my seat.*

*Her mom glances back at us, her eyes gleaming.*

*"Did you see how I pinched the dough closed, Hunter?"*

*"Yes. I think I can do it now."*

*Her face lights when she smiles. “Really?”*

*I glance at Isabel because she sticks her tongue out at me. “Yeah.” I pinch her leg hard under the table and she squeals, jumping in her seat.*

*Her mother gives Isabel a strange look. “Isabel, do you have ants in your pants?” her mom asks, turning back to set the timer on the oven.*

*“No, just Hunter,” Isabel mutters too low for her mom to hear.*

*She shoves me again and I yank on her ponytail. Her neck is arched backwards, her face tilting towards to ceiling. Her ponytail is in my hand.*

*I grip it tight and don’t let go.*

*She growls when I tug it again.*

*“Say sorry,” I demand. “And I’ll let you go.”*

*“No way!”*

*I yank on her long ponytail and Isabel shoves me out of my seat this time, but I pull her down with me. We’re on her kitchen floor, wrestling and rolling on top of each other. She lands on top of me, pinning my shoulders to the ground with her knees and she pinches both of cheeks in her hands. I push her off and settle on top of her, pulling her hair again.*

*Her dad joins her mom in the kitchen and they laugh at us, murmuring things too low for me to hear. But their laugh is a kind laugh, like they know something we don’t.*

*Isabel lands on top of me, her head is bowed and her hair free from her ponytail holder. Her long hair tickles my face. She grins at me while she presses my hands down to my sides with hers. entwining our fingers together, I smile up at her.*

*“Come here,” I whisper to her.*

*Her grin widens as her brows knit. “Why?”*

*“I want to tell you something.”*

*She shakes her head, her big eyes gauging my expression, yet fearful I might pull one over on her.*

*“Then tell me.”*

*My smile gets bigger because of her distrust in me.*

*“I want to tell you in your ear.”*

*She looks at me for a moment and I wonder if she can feel my heart beating through my chest.*

*She bends her head, tilting so her ear is lowered to my lips.*

*“I love you, Isabel.”*

*Her body jolts, her lips brushing mine when she turns her head to look at me, her hair sliding across my face. “You love me, Hunter?” Isabel says softly, her hands squeezing mine.*

*“More than you’ll ever know.”*

*She presses her soft lips to mine and something fiery in my body sparks and goes haywire. “I love you, too, Hunter.”*

*At the end of the day, Isabel and I eat cherry pie with her parents and Tyler and Hero. We all sit around the kitchen table. I steal kisses from Isabel when no one is looking. She keeps giggling when I kiss her mouth. She kisses me back, whispering how much she likes kissing me.*

*Today is the first day I told Isabel I loved her.*

*Today is the day I fell in love with Isabel’s lips and the taste of sweet cherry pie that coat them.*

*God, I love this girl.*

*I can kiss this girl for eternity.*

*I can love this girl forever.*

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Punishing Bliss & Grandpa Charlie*

“Head down,” I say in my most controlled voice. I have her safely strapped to the cross in my converted play room. I haven’t been able to write so I thought if I release some sexual tension, then that might help me through this clogged phase. Ivy is sexually masochistic and submissive. This makes it easy to dominate her. We are working on orgasm denial. I take joy in this because Ivy is so responsive. It’s a beautiful and extraordinary process when she comes brutally and I get to unleash my inner sadistic self and punish her for it.

I fiercely stare down at the blindfold as if I could see her striking eyes and snatch her soul from them.

Knowing that I have control over her—although it is illusionary control—in this moment makes my head heady. Whether the result is pleasure or pain, Ivy will enthusiastically and willingly take whatever I have to offer.

“Hunter...?”

“Shh.” I hit the undersides of her breasts with the crop that I’ve learned how to wield quite nicely. “No talking, Tinker. You’re gonna make me bring out the

ball gag, love. I know you don't want that." I cruelly pinch her nipple and switch the vibrator on the highest level, placing it right on her sensitive clit. Her body instantly bucks and then tightens. She's close. I slide the vibrator to her slick opening, licking the hollow of her throat.

Her breath hitches and she trembles violently. "My Salvation, please. I beg you."

"No talking unless spoken to." I give her another swat of the crop across her thighs, plunging the vibrator deeper but not entirely in her. She mewls and her body breaks out into a fine sweat.

A smug grin plays on my lips. I can't help but feel superior. She doesn't call me Master or Sir. I am her Salvation. In here I am a god and nothing less.

"Tell me what you want, Tinker?"

"To come. Please."

I run my nose down the side of her cheek, nipping her chin. "Mm. Not yet."

She groans and grunts in protest.

Bending, I lick her navel, thrusting the vibrator fully into her. She tenses, shudders, and comes viciously. "Oh no, Tinker. What have you done?" I tease as I undo the straps. I stroke her hair and massage her ass as she helplessly sags against me. "You know what this means."

"Please," she whispers barely audible.

"Uh-uh. Over the desk. Now."

"But I can't walk," she pouts. It's adorable. But cuteness won't get her far with me.

I swiftly remove the blindfold and stand while she kneels gracefully to the floor. I point to the mahogany



desk with the crop like a sergeant tolerating no bullshit. “Then crawl,” I demand firmly.

“Self-indulgent fucker,” Ivy says under her breath. I harshly smack her ass with my hand as she begins to crawl. Her entire body bucks forward. She halts and gasps. “Eight strikes of the cane for that.” Once she’s bending over the desk with her head down and her stunning ass up for my viewing pleasure, I select a cane that we will both enjoy. I palm her ass until her skin is heated and the blood flow is good there.

I whack the air with it a few times and she cringes.

This is going to be good.

I need this.

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## **Isabel**

Transfixed, I watch Hunter supply Ivy’s ass with a series of continual blows from a polished wooden cane. Blue let me in with a weird smirk on her face and told me where to find him. Now I know what that smirk was for. My anger peaks with every pleasurable moan slash horrifying scream from Ivy until it’s an infinite about and can no longer be suppressed. The glass vase filled with fresh lilac flowers falls from my hands and bursts on impact. Sharp shards of glass and water skid across the dark linoleum floor, moving like a wave crashing over a sandy shore, soaking Hunter’s boots.

When I bring my eyes from the mess, he stares at me. But not in shock or astonishment, he looks more annoyed and pissed. Max is wrong. I shouldn't have come here.

Feeling like a pathetic idiot, I flee and run as fast as my feet can carry me. Hunter calls my name, but I am out of there. I successfully reach his front yard, pulling my car keys from my purse with a quivering hand when he freaking tackles me like I'm trying to score a touchdown. Every wisp of oxygen is knocked from my lungs when I hit the ground and get a mouthful of dewy grass.

"What the fuck?" I shout as his big body collapses on top of mine.

He *laughs*, winded and his chest heaving. "Damn, you can run."

His impossibly hot erection stabs me in the ass, sending a strong ripple of pulsing lava through me.

Shit!

He still has that effect on me.

"Get the hell off me," I pant, out of breath.

"You're cutting me down, baby, with that sharp tongue. It hurts." He doesn't move. In fact, I think he's enjoying this way too much.

"You are *squishing* me," I whine.

He looks down and gives his hips a hard thrust, pushing himself further into me. I inhale sharply and attempt to hide my shudder. But Hunter doesn't miss anything. "In that case, I should really get up." Hunter's tone is mocking and amused.

He doesn't move.

He thrusts again.

I groan, clenching my fingers in the soft grass.  
“Hunter, remove your cock from between my ass.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” he laughs in my ear before jumping up. He takes a moment to stare down at me as if he loves the idea of me helpless and sprawled out before him. The way his intense blue eyes study me with sharp interest has my heart in frenzy. Hunter feasts on this sight, not caring at all to hide it. And God help me, my heart flutters and the growing ache between my legs is more present than ever.

He grins like he has read my mind and then he offers his hand to me. I look up at his outreached palm and think of it as an aid for help but also a confirmed sign of my damnation. Without another thought, I take it and he pulls me to my feet.

“I was just on my way out,” I mumble after he hands me my keys.

“You should sit down for a bit. You seem flustered.”

I swallow hard and take an unsteady step back. “No. I need to go.”

Hunter eyes me for a moment, his expression hopeful. “Stay.”

That one word from his mouth has my heart tripping over itself. Damn. He has me in his clutches again. I can't shake this feeling that the worst is yet to come between us. I nod, not trusting my voice. My body can't stop quivering. My world is spinning with no plans to ever stop to let me gain some balance.

When I take a step towards his house, my steps falter. Hunter catches me in his grasp and I land face first on his bare chest. I involuntarily inhale his masculine scent. God, how I've missed him. I just want to wrap

him in my arms and tell him he is home for me. But I don't. I swallow past the huge lump in my throat and shove away from him.

Avoiding his eyes, I smooth the wrinkles from my dress so I'm surprised when Hunter swiftly bends and gathers my legs in a tight grip. He stands and throws me over his shoulder.

I feverishly pound his back. "Let me go, asshole. I can walk."

He ruthlessly slaps the back of my thigh and I feel the sting all over. I grit my teeth to keep the moan safely inside myself. "You have me reconsidering teaching you some proper manners. I should spank you until you beg for forgiveness. I am a merciful god."

"You are no god," I laugh breathlessly as I bounce on his shoulder.

*But damn your cockiness turns me on.*

It's like I want to hate him and fuck him all at once.

This only occurs when I deal with Hunter Knight.

I immediately hate myself because of this.

Once we're inside, he sets me down in a wooden chair at the kitchen table. "You want a drink? Water?"

"I want to go home," I reply, crossing my arms over my chest.

He takes two water bottles from the fridge and hands me one. "Now why would you go and say something like that?"

Before I can answer, Ivy comes down the steps and joins us. She has on his large T-shirt and nothing else.

"Hey you. I'm glad we didn't scare you off." She's beaming.

“It’s not like I could say no,” I say, glaring at Hunter, who grins at me. He loves this.

Bastard.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” I ask tentatively.

Pink hits her cheeks and she shakes her head. “He went easy on me.”

“Let me see,” Hunter says, moving towards her. She glances at me and he frowns. “I won’t ask again, Ivy.” She tenses and braces her hands on the edge of the table and looks straight-ahead as Hunter lifts the hem of the shirt, exposing rosy red welts in horizontal rows on her backside and thighs. I don’t want to look but I can’t tear my eyes away from the agonizing scene of her wounded flesh. It pisses me off just as much as it excites me.

Focused on the task at hand, Hunter traces a few of her welts. She shivers and I clutch the water bottle. In this moment I hate her. In this moment I want to *be* her. The urge to be self-destructive is absurdly appealing.

*No cutting.*

*No cutting.*

*No cutting...*

“You’re going to soak after this and then I’m going to rub you down,” He whispers, letting the shirt fall back down and kissing the top of her head.

“Okay,” she says just as softly.

I decide I hate them both right now. I doubt it will last, though. “I should get going.”

Both sets of eyes land on me. “Nonsense. You came over for something.” Why does Hunter sound so suggestive, maybe I’m imagining things because I want him to do naughty stuff to me as well.

The dark cloud of guilt grows thicker above my head.

*Max...*

*No.*

*Not here.*

*Not now.*

“Um, I wanted to apologize for being such a bitch to you at dinner.” I glance at Ivy and smile. “I’m not usually a bitch. I promise.”

“Good,” she says, smiling as well. “I like you.”

Does she mean like me like me?

Hunter strokes his blond almost invisible stubble on his chin as if considering what I’ve said. “I’ll forgive you on one condition.”

My throat tightens. “Yes?”

“We set a play date.” He gives me a smile that’s equally beautiful as it is evil.

Standing though I still feel shaky, I grab the water bottle and turn sharply on my heels. But before I exit, I whisper, “I’ll call you.”

\*\*\*

## **Hunter**

I sit at my laptop, typing away. After blackmailing Isabel everything instantly came right back to me. I’ve got my groove back and I’ll be damned if I’m letting go anytime soon. My words slow and my fingers pause on the keyboard as the realization hits me.

Is this actually blackmail?

I don't think so. I mean, she has a choice. It's not like I'm forcing her to do anything.

Taking my phone out, I stare down at her number, debating on whether or not to call her and play off the entire thing as a joke. Luckily my Grandpa Charlie picture and number pops up before I hit the "call" button.

"It took you this long to call me, old fart?"

"Hunter, my boy. How've you been? I've heard the old witch of a bitch went missing."

I stifle my laughter. "Yeah, I haven't seen much of Mom these days."

"I never liked her, you know. She was a mean rattlesnake in the grass. I knew it with one look. I told your father. I told him. But my son never listens to me. He hates me."

"He does not." I don't know why my dad has such a grudge against him. Grandpa Charlie is the shit.

"He does, boy. He does. But I'll love him till the day I die."

"If it makes you feel better, I love you, Charlie."

"Aw. You know how to make an old man feel real special. I love you more. I saw your picture on the news. Reporters say you go with the pretty girl that paints the pretty portraits."

"She's a friend. You can't believe the tabloids, Grandpa."

He sighs into the phone. "I know. They call all the time. Asking me this and asking me that like a have a damn clue. My grandson does not call me like he should."

“Guilt trip, Grandpa. Really?” I stare at the ceiling and rub my temples because it’s working.

“I’m lonely, boy. Maryanne is gone—God bless her soul—and I have no one. I miss my son and I miss my grandbabies. They all are grown now and don’t want anything to do with me. You all should be taking advantage of this old man. My days are numbered.”

He lives in a private assistant living residence in Charlotte. The best money can buy. But he is there alone. Grandma has been gone since I was four. “Pack a bag, old man. I’m flying you out.”

It’s eleven forty-five at night when he bursts through the door. I wanted to pick him up from the airport but Ivy insisted that she go so I could get my room ready for his visit. He’s still how I remembered: All gray-white and too fat and jolly.

“Come give your Grandpa a hug, boy.”

Smiling, I wrap my arms around all four hundred pounds plus of him and give him a tight squeeze. Blue strolls down the stairs and gives him a grin. We hold each other at arm’s length. “Who’s the other pretty girl?” he asks, playfully wiggling his snow-white brows.

“I am Blue.”

He lets me go and gestures for a hug. I’m mildly shocked that she complies. She lays her head on his puffed chest. “So soft. You smell of whisky and spice but look like Santa.”

Grandpa gives her a hardy laugh. “You look like Barbie and smell like expensive flowers and cigarettes.”



“I made spaghetti. I hope you have an appetite, old man,” I say, smiling down at the only father figure I’ve had respect for.

We all sit around my table, eating and laughing. Blue sticks to Charlie’s hip the entire night. Ivy told me she doesn’t have any family and was found in an alley when she was just a baby. Charlie is warm and welcoming and lovable and infectious. She finally seems like a decent human being for once. Hero doesn’t show at dinner and he isn’t answering his phone. I hope he’s safe. I take his room while Ivy and Blue sleep together in the other room. I doubt that Blue wants to sleep next to me and, frankly, I don’t trust her enough to keep both eyelids shut at the same time.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Needed Company*

Naya and Lark flew in from London two hours ago. They have to leave tomorrow afternoon because Lark has a show in London for thousands of his adoring fans. Naya and Lark took Charlie out to lunch. Blue went with them since she is now inseparable from the old man.

I sit somberly at the piano playing an Erike Satie classic piece: *Gymnopédie No. 1*. Its beauty is beyond my words, but my soul captures the haunted melodies as they flow effortlessly through the keys from under my fingers. My eyes are closed tight and the curtains are wide open. But the warmth of the sun that lingers on my face is not hot enough to keep me heated. I am cold, bone-chilling, numbing cold. I am in a place where warmth is not capable of reaching, where the brilliancy of beauty is leached out. It's as if everything went out of focus and my world slowly faded from color to somber gray and now I am at the point where the transition to black comes in. It's solely black.

My heart.

My soul.

My mind.

Black.

Black.

Black bottomless pits of...oblivion.

I finish the piece off on a heavy note, sitting here for a while to collect my thoughts until my phone goes off.

It's Isabel.

"You've made your decision?"

"Hunter," she breathes, "I can't."

*But you want too.* I sigh disappointedly into the phone. "That's a pity. We would've had endless... fun. You and I, I mean. You seemed to enjoy what I did to Ivy."

"I can't go behind Max's back." She pauses and blows out a frustrated breath. *Interesting that she doesn't deny it.* "He wouldn't understand and, if he did, he would never allow it. Besides, I've been talking to him about traveling. He's too busy here to ever join me, but I told him that I would be fine by myself."

"Where would you go?"

"I wouldn't tell you, because you would track me down."

A grin takes over my face. "Wise choice."

There is silence as we listen to one another's breathing. It's weird but it's us. "Hey, what are doing right now?"

"Sitting at the piano, conversing with you."

"Smart ass." I hear her smile in her voice. "Can you play something for me?"

Putting my phone on speaker, I place it on the polished bench next to me and play the piece over again.

"That's beautifully sad, Hunter."

"Where are you?" I whisper, having the urge to be next to her and nowhere else.

"At my house. I could use..."

Ivy strolls over and massages my hunched shoulders. “I made brownies. Are you hungry?” I hold a finger up to my lips, giving Ivy signal to be quiet.

“What where you saying, Isabel?”

“Nothing,” by the tone of her voice I know she heard Ivy. “I should go. Bye Hunter.”

“Wait—” She hangs up before I can say anything. I grab my keys and then turn to Ivy, who is frowning at me. “I’ll be back. Save me a brownie?”

She nods, her expression disappointed and a little frustrated. She can’t be surprised that I chose Isabel. When it comes down to it, I’ll always choose Isabel.

Isabel’s unfinished sentence replays over in my mind as I start the engine.

*I could use company...*

Her car is still there when I arrive and the door is unlocked. “Isabel?” There’s a loud clink and a ruffling sound.

“In the bathroom, Hunter. Give me a minute.”

My heart squeezes in my chest as I approach the closed door. I jiggle the knob. It’s locked. “Isabel, let me in.”

“I’ll be done in a second.” The wavering in her voice gives her away. She can never deceive me. There’s that sound again, the sound of shards of glass being frantically shuffled around a hard surface.

Pressing my forehead to the door, I suppress the impulse to yell at her and to burst the damn thing down. I grit my teeth and say, “Let me, Isabel. I know. It’s okay. Just let me in.” The shuffling abruptly stops and I

hear her inhale a sharp breath. "Please, baby." There's a long pause and then the door unlocks and swings open. I work my jaw as I stare at her. It's the only thing I can do to not lose my mind.

"Don't tell Max," she whispers as if she was a child caught doing something bad. I give my head a slight nod, staring at the scrap of tissue she presses to her left wrist. The thin white paper is slowly soaked with red. I swat her hand away and she winces as I apply more pressure on the bleeding wound. Glancing around, I notice the mirror to the medicine cabinet is broken and splintered into a perfect halo. Shards of fragmented glass twinkle as they rest in the sink and scarlet is smeared all over the white marble. Bloody fingerprints mark the walls and the roll of tissue paper. It's like a horror movie in here.

Sitting her on the closed toilet lid, I search for the cabinet for disinfectants and something to cover her cut with. I apply an antiseptic dressing and wrap it tightly, then I clean the blood off and wipe everything down with bleach the best I can. I am thorough, though. The bathroom is spotless, but my white T-shirt is covered in her blood.

"You could kill someone and get away with it."

I glance at her, barely contained anger emitting off me. "How can you joke at a time like this?"

She lets her eyes fall. "Sorry," she whispers halfheartedly.

Meticulously scrubbing my hands in foamy soap, I wash, rinse and repeat. A sickening illness washes over me as I acknowledge Isabel's blood stained my hands and clothes. It's wrong and makes me feel like dirt shit,

which I'm trying to avoid. I've put her through enough. I do not need her blood on my hands...or clothes.

Only when Isabel presses her chest into my back and circles her arms around my waist do I realize the mirror is fogged and steam drifting up from the scolding water. My hands are red and shaking. Turning the faucet off, I brace myself on edge of the marble sink and squeeze until the bones in my fingers pop and threaten to break.

"Hunter...Hunter please stop." Her frantic plea and terrified voice is lost in the distance. The pounding of my heart is louder. My mind is adrift in the gruesome past of my persistent misery that never fails to appear from the shadows to creep up on me to deliver a fatal blow.

Small fingers painfully grip my groin, trying to snatch it from my body. Growling, my hand locks around Isabel's wrist and I squeeze until she winces and lets go. "You're hurting me, Hunter."

I immediately release the fragile wrist, turning to face her. "What the fuck was that about?"

She holds my gaze for the longest moment before she stares at her shoes, giving off the impression of a sheepish school girl that I wouldn't mind spanking. "I'm sorry, but that was the only way I could get your attention."

To my surprise, I burst into laughter. She looks up at me with a confused gleam in her eyes and a suppressed grin. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because only you would try to castrate me to get my attention." My laughter dies as my eyes dart to the

bandage. “You can’t do that anymore.” My stern tone is harsh to my own ears.

“I know,” she whispers, hiding her wrist behind her back. “Thanks. You didn’t have to take care of me.”

“I love taking care of you.” The confession slips from my lips without permission, not that I mind though. “I’ll always take care of you, if you give me a chance.”

Her hazel-green eyes are wide and she visibly swallows hard, avoiding my gaze. “I love Max.”

“You love me more,” I murmur, stepping close enough to say it in her ear. She doesn’t respond to the challenge in my voice. She shudders, taking an unsteady step back. “Where are your keys?”

“In my bag.”

Working my jaw, I take pleasure in watching her squirm. “Give them to me. Now.”

Her brows snap together. “Why?”

“Don’t you trust me?” I say through a mocking smile. “No questions. Just hand me your keys.”

She takes a deep breath, then nods. I watch her leave the bathroom and then shortly returns with a set of keys on a crystal heart chain she dumps in my waiting palm while sulking. “You’re spending the day running errands with me. But first, I have to fix your mirror.”

## **PART II**

### **THE UNREPENTANT MAN**



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age ten.*

*Dark.*

*It's too dark in here.*

*I wonder where all the light went.*

*It smells so foul.*

*We all smell foul like stale pee and raw sewage.*

*This cage is too small for my body. My stomach rumbles with hunger pains and my throat is extra dry. I need water. When was the last time I had any water? I feel sick and cramped and restricted. I feel like a caged beast left to rot in its own waste.*

*I hate this feeling.*

*I hate Grace.*

*I hate her so much.*

*I could kill her.*

*Hero and Naya whine in their cages next to me.*

*They're awake.*

*I wish they stayed asleep.*

*They don't need to see this.*

*They don't need to be here.*

*They have suffered so much already.*

*I have to stop this.*

*I would stay here forever if they were completely free from the monster that we call Mother.*

*“Close your eyes,” I rasp into the still blackness.*

*“Picture happiness.”*

*“I’m scared, Hunter,” Hero sniffs.*

*“Me, too,” Naya mumbles weakly.*

*“Don’t be. I’m right here. And I’ll never leave you. Never. I’m going to protect both of you.”*

*“What if she comes back?” Hero asks softly. “My back and shoulders hurt. I don’t want to be beaten again. It hurts. I hurt.”*

*“I’ll slit her throat,” I answer. “I’ll slit her throat while she sleeps. It’ll be easy. A piece of cake.”*

*“Hero, no!” Naya cries.*

*“You’re gonna kill Mom?”*

*“Yes. It’ll be over quickly, in a flash.”*

*“You can’t, Hunter,” Naya begs. “Mama is sick. You can’t kill her or she won’t get better.”*

*I grit my teeth out of anger. I love my sister, but I don’t understand her. “She beats you. She starves you. She locks you in an animal cage for days. Why are you protecting her?”*

*“Mama is sick. She can’t help it, Hunter,” she says, taking up for the witch.*

*Grace is an evil witch from hell.*

*“A sick animal should be put out of its misery,” I say.*

*“No, Hunter, no,” Naya says through tears. “If you kill her that means you’re no better than Mama. Mama is sick. You are not. Don’t do it.”*

*“What’s your vote, Hero?” I ask, already knowing his answer.*

*“Don’t do it,” he answers, agreeing with Naya like I knew he would.*

*“We could be free,” I tempt. “Free to do whatever. Free to eat whenever we want.”*

*“We won’t be free. She’ll haunt us after death.”*

*“Like Casper the Friendly Ghost?”*

*“I doubt she’ll be friendly about it, Naya,” I say. Closing my eyes and seeing Isabel’s warm smile.*

*“I’m hungry.”*

*“Me, too.”*

*“Close your eyes and picture happiness,” I say. They get quiet and I know they’re listening. “Tell me what you see.”*

*I listen while they tell me.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Unexpected Gift*

The sky is dark and the moon is up when I reach Max's office building. He quit his job as an officer to take over his father's company three years ago. Isabel is peacefully asleep in the passenger seat. I would wake her if I didn't feel guilty. I glance around the half empty parking lot. There are two guards posted by the entrance and I'm sure the lot has surveillance, so I don't have a problem leaving her unattended. But I do crack the windows and lock the doors. Before stepping out the car, I change my shirt. The stained white shirt with Isabel's blood is tossed in with heaps of other laundry. It's a good thing I always keep a change of clothes in my truck.

"Name?" one of the bulkier guards demands.

"Hunter Knight."

He whispers into his earpiece, nodding to something I can't hear. For a heart-stopping moment, I think the other one will search me, which has me on edge. I prefer

strangers to keep their hands to themselves when it comes to me. “You’re clear.”

Lifting my chin, I head into the gleaming building that shoots up and pierces the midnight clouds. The attractive dark-haired secretary eagerly gestures to the bank of elevators. “Right up to the top floor, Mr. Knight.”

“Thanks.”

My pace slows when I step off the elevators. I hear voices drifting from his closed office door. I note that he is having a conversation with his mother.

“...she can’t sleep, Mom. What do you want me to do? I’m helpless in this situation. You have no idea what we go through. She has nightmares, and not just once in a while. Isabel has them consecutively. She has them every night. It’s like I’m not enough.”

“She needs help, Max. I know what fresh scars look like and she has them. All over. She’s going to be your wife and the mother of your children... my grandchildren. Don’t give up on her so easily. Fight for her.”

“Mom, please. I’m tired and I’m behind on some stuff...” I don’t stay to listen because I am walking back to the elevators when the most outrageous and insane thought I ever had the idea of entertaining happens.

*I am going to save her.*

*I am going to take her.*

\*\*\*

## Isabel

Warm hands tilt my face up towards the light as if appraising. My eyes are reluctant to open but when they do, Hunter's stormy eyes penetrate mine. His gaze is attentive yet detached. "I thought you were going to sleep forever."

When the haze fades and my eyes are more focused, I glance around the dungeon-like bedroom. I lift my hands to touch his hair that shines despite the dullness in light but pause in mid-motion when the chains come into view. Restraints. They're on my wrists and ankles. But the worst one is a thin metal collar around my neck. My trembling fingers reach up to touch it and then come into contact with the small steel lock in the back. "What's this, Hunter?"

He smiles, his expression amused as if I said the silliest thing. "A collar, my sweet."

My instincts take over and I begin to panic. "What's happening? I want to go home. Where's Max?"

His eyes darken and he reclines in a chair with a kind of languid impatience about him. "Where you're not."

"Hunter, let me go. Right now. This isn't funny."

"You're absolutely right. This is not funny, but this is *necessary*."

Tears spill down my cheeks, filling my mouth that's already flooded with saliva. "I'm not consenting to any of this. You're breaking the law, Hunter. This is kidnapping." I draw in a shaky breath and force the next words out. "Let. Me. Go."

"N.O."

Perplexed, I gape at the person I thought I knew so well. My incredulous stare doesn't have the desired effect on him. He winks at me. How is it possible that I don't recognize his eyes that I memorize even in my sleep? Has my rejection taken a toll on his sanity? Has he gone mad like Smith and...Omar? Am I just another victim?

*He can kill me if he wanted to.*

The overwhelming guilt wracks me after that thought passes. No. He wouldn't kill me. But I'm unsure of what else he *wouldn't* do.

His rough hand grasps my chin, refocusing my teary gaze. "The chains are bolted into the wall above your bed. They're long enough for you to go to the bathroom, so hygiene won't be a problem. But the chains stop a few feet from the door I have a key to. I'm the only one that has the key to this door. This room will always be locked, Isabel."

When he says my name, everything feels more real. This is not a dream or some kind of twisted fantasy. This is my new reality. I grip the sheets beneath me, not scarce of the supply of tears. "Why are you doing this?" I squeeze the words from a constricted throat. It burns to say them.

He leans forward and traces a healing scar above my right forearm and, for the first time, I note that I am only in underwear. Fresh underwear. And my skin faintly smells of jasmine soap. Did he bathe me? "You belong to me now, Isabel."

My head snaps up and my forehead creases as my brows furrow. "I belong to you?"

The muscles in his jaw clench. “In every sense of the word.”

I swallow past the huge lump in my throat. “I don’t. Hunter, I’m marrying Max. I have a wedding to plan. I have a life to live. I don’t belong to you. I *never* will.” *I have a life outside of you.* Maybe that will have a profound effect on him.

It doesn’t.

He rakes a hand over his mouth, his dark eyes on me. He’s losing patience. “I’m going to let that go for now. In here, I am a god. In here, I am your god. Do you understand what I am saying?”

I don’t answer him.

*I hate you.*

“In the future, I want you to answer verbally. There will be repercussions for your actions, so you should think wisely and behave. Am I clear?”

After a heartbeat, he stands and ambles over to me, wrapping his long fingers firmly around my neck. He adds more pressure and I wonder if he can feel my pulse jumping. “You belong to me. Say it.” Hunter gradually increases the pressure when I don’t respond. My breath hitches and gets stuck in my throat. “Say. It.”

He does look like a god standing before me with the threat of taking away my precious air. “I-I belong to you,” I rasp with constricted vocals.

He drops his hand, flexing his powerful fist in front of my face. “Good. I already have dinner prepared for you. I won’t be able to spend the night, though.” Hunter gives me a sympathetic look as if this is bad news to me. “But I will be back in morning to feed you breakfast and noon for lunch and again for dinner. I will provide all of



your meals. I am the only source of nurturance for you. You should learn to be nice to me.” Hunter beams. It is very deadly. “I’ll give you a little tour.” The room is spacious but it’s still four brick walls of imprisonment. He proceeds to point out a poorly lit bathroom that’s a few steps away—complete with a shower/tub and a toilet. Hunter instructs me that there is a mini fridge that’s filled with bottle waters and juices among other beverages in a corner. There is no food inside. He will feed me whenever he *feels* I should eat, whenever he thinks it’s *necessary*. Hunter has even gone so far to consider my entertainment.

*That fucker.*

There is a massive flat screen mounted on the wall that includes Netflix and Direct TV. He even has his Kindle plugged into a socket, charging. I don’t say anything as he rests his hands on his hips. He glances around the room, his expression utterly smug. Hunter seems satisfied with his work, satisfied at the new cage he has created for his pet Isabel.

I nod to whatever he says, then he exits and comes back with a tray of my favorite: his chocolate chip pancakes that I haven’t tasted in three years. Hunter sits next to me. But when he attempts to feed me, I smack the entire thing out of his hand, flipping the tray over. The plate bursts on impact and sticky syrup splatters everywhere.

“Why are you doing this?” I scream, fisting my hands in my hair like a madwoman.

He doesn’t reply. Hunter simply bends and collects broken fragments of the dark orchid plate. The deep

purple shards of dish remind me of the color of Max's eyes.

Max!

Max is going to find me.

He is going to free me.

It's difficult for me to hide my smile and instant elation and relief.

"Max is going to find me. And when he does, I'm going to make sure you reap your *repercussions*, fucking dick head. You are going to die alone and sad because you're a fucking nutcase like your mother... maybe Sally was right all along. You do kill everyone in the end."

His head sharply cocks to the side, mimicking a predator's when hearing prey approach. Hunter gracefully stands, leisurely wiping his hands on his jeans. When he turns towards me, his eyes are closer to the color of coal than the sky in the daylight. The veins in his neck and arms are bulging and his jaw is ticking.

He smiles, but his smile definitely does not reach his eyes and is so far from kind it terrifies me. With his grave stare on me, his fingers swiftly undo his belt buckle and he yanks it free from all the loops with a silent *whoosh* that sounds as loud as nails on a chalkboard to me. He folds it, doubling it in his hands. His intention is crystal clear. He doesn't look like a god now, in fact, far from it. He looks like Lucifer. People have the understanding that monsters are visually repulsive and unattractive. How wrong they all are. The devil was the most stunning angel that God ever created in heaven, the definition of beauty itself. But his objective was pure wickedness like Hunter's. The more

beautiful the monster, the more malevolence it will bestow. Beauty is a sin.

My heart plummets to my stomach and my breathing is labored.

*He's going to whip me!*

I scurry across the bed, my limbs getting caught in the twisted sheets as he begins to lurch towards me. I thrash and cry in his arms, but they are strong and able to keep me face down into the mattress. One hand is pressed into the middle of my back, weighing me down while the other deals out a torrent of blows with his leather belt.

A deafening scream leaves my trembling lips as the first strike of fire lands on my backside, crippling heat spreading through my body. "You," a harsh lick of the belt, "will learn," a hit across my thighs, "to watch your mouth." He gives me another swat on my backside and more brutal ones follow. With each whack of the belt the blaze across my skin intensifies. I have to focus on breathing because I almost choke on the pain and drown in my tears.

The pain is excruciating and robs my lungs of oxygen. I break out into a severe sweat with every muscle in my body shaking and aching and strained, bracing for the next strike. Strands of hair are plastered across my wet face and mouth. I reach back and try to block my sore bottom with my hands to alleviate the pain there, but he grips my wrists and presses them cruelly into the small of my back as he distributes more strikes that I threaten to blackout from. I shriek and writhe in the sheets, begging for him to stop, begging for mercy. But I don't think he ever hears me, or cares.

My body goes limp as I suck in a shuddering breath, realizing he has stopped or maybe paused from the strenuous activity to catch his breath and gain his energy back only to wield the belt on my flesh again.

He's panting and gasping for breath just as badly as I am. Then he tenderly begins to massage the welts all across my back, thighs, and legs. I groan out in pain as his fingers run across the abraded flesh. His fingers seem to intensify and prolong the burning agony.

Tears drop quietly into the bundled sheets as he rubs me down with refreshing cold cream that tingles in areas I know he broke skin. Hunter kisses my wounds, shushing me at the same time. His skillful fingers massage me until I become lax in his hold and barley sniffing.

I even find myself leaning into his touches that bring me so much relief, and yet is the very origin of my despair. I shiver and moan when he bends and brushes his supple lips behind both of my trembling knees. It seems like a silent plea of some kind. I don't know what he wants from me. He stands and moves about the room.

I can't believe he actually had the audacity to *whip* me.

He beat me with a belt.

It hurt like hell.

Hunter hurt me.

Who is this Hunter?

The minty cream feels pleasant against my wounded skin and douses the burning sensation. The relief is amazing. But I'm sore and aching—all over.

When I gather the courage, I peek from my moist lashes and notice Hunter meticulously scrubbing the

syrup off the floor with every ounce of concentration focused on that task. I'd give anything to know what he's thinking. He can't possibly keep me down here forever.

*Can he?*

He dunks the dirty rag into the bucket of soapy water and wrings it dry. He pauses for a moment as if he can feel my eyes on him. But when he turns his head back to look at me, I hide my face in the white sheets that smell of him too much.

"I'll be back in the morning. Goodnight."

The door shuts and the sickening sound of the lock turns, declaring my confinement loud and clear.

I'm left staring blankly at the wet smear on the floor that's quickly drying, wondering where the hell I am.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Going Away Party*

“Where the hell have you been, Hunter?” Hero slurs, draping his arm over my shoulder while he takes sips of liquor from the open bottle.

“Busy. What’s all of this?” I gesture to my trashed house that’s cramped with drunken boisterous people. Lark and Naya are sucking face in a lawn chair by the pool. Charlie has a young girl twerking in his lap while he puffs on a cigar, playing cards at a table nearby like he’s some old school gangster. Ivy and Blue are basically fucking each other as they dance under the paper lanterns that glow and flicker like flyer flies as they hang from the tree branches.

“My going away party, brother. Haven’t you heard? I’m leaving. For Paris. Tomorrow. You should give your baby brother a kiss before he leaves.” Hero sloppily plants a wet kiss on my cheek and laughs. “I’m going to miss you, big brother. And I know you’re going to miss me. Who will you bitch at and take care of now? But this little birdie has to take flight.” Hero sways and sings alone with the rock tune as I stand here dumfounded.

He’s leaving. I won’t be able to look after him if he’s all the way in Paris. Hero’s not ready to be on his own yet. I suddenly don’t want him to leave. He’s in such a delicate spot in his life right now. People can take

advantage of him. People will take advantage of him. He's young and impressionable. Blue is throwing him to the wolves in the modeling world. Hero doesn't have any experience in the fashion industry. I'm starting to think Blue's invitation is much more sinister and detrimental than it seems.

"When's your flight?" I ask.

"Ten A.M. first flight out." He lifts the bottle, giving it a shake. "A few more rounds and then I'm off for a nap." Hero playfully strokes his blond waves. "I'm a beauty queen now, so I have to get my beauty rest." Then he places each hand on the sides of his mouth and yells, "You hear that, bitches? I'm gonna get paid to look pretty, so fuck you all!"

Naya looks up and frowns at him. Hero doesn't do too good around her or Lark...or Taylor and Rex. Naya straightens her lacy black dress and her and Lark come over to join us. Hero's jaw tightens when they approach.

"Congrats, man. Pairs, that's the hotspot for fashion," Lark says. His hair is long and shaggy and every inch of his flesh on his body is covered in intricate ink that tells hardcore stories of rock, sex, and drugs. But to me, he will always be that scrawny kid with too many piercings.

"I can't wait to see you on the catwalk," Naya says sheepishly. But when she tries to hug him Hero aggressively grabs her face and sucks at her mouth. Naya freezes and Lark clenches his fists. Lark has learned not to attack Hero when provoked. That is a skill I have yet to achieve.

I yank Hero away, smacking him upside that thick skull of his. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Hero groans and desperately grabs for Naya again. Naya flinches, fearfully grabbing on Lark's arm. "Fucking bitch," Hero hisses, stumbling away and rubbing at his head.

"I'm sorry, Naya. Hero's—"

"I know," she whispers, staring at Hero, who is shoving his way through the crowd and inside the house. He pushes a girl, who doesn't look like much of a swimmer, into the pool where she splashes helplessly around until some guys feel guilty enough to help pull her out. "I have to go and talk to him before we leave again." Naya untangles herself from Lark, but he is right on her heels. She abruptly stops and then adds, "Alone."

Lark sighs, scrubbing his hand down his face. "Babe, you're killin' me. I don't trust him alone with you."

She reaches up and touches his face. "Then trust me."

"I do, baby. I do."

"I'll be back then."

Lark sighs, massaging the back of his neck as he stares at Naya following behind Hero.

"She knows what she's doing. Naya's a good girl." And without another word, I grab a seat in one of the folded chairs in the back yard and watch the show Ivy and Blue so kindly put on without thinking about Isabel or my impending doom.

\*\*\*

**Hero**



A soft knock taps on my closed door. “Get the fuck away from my door!”

“It’s me, Hero. Let me in.” God, the sound of her soft voice makes my stomach quiver. I hate that I want her when she wants nothing to do with me. I hate that Naya’s my sister but we aren’t blood related in any way whatsoever.

“Leave me the hell alone, bitch!”

“Please,” she murmurs, the pleading in her voice is all too familiar, mimicking my own.

Taking a deep breath, I reach out and grab the knob and press my forehead against the door.

“Close your eyes and picture my face when you’re scared...”

“I’ll always be with you even when I’m not. A thousand seas will never keep us apart...”

“I’ll carry you when you’re weak...”

“I’ll support you when you’re strong...”

“You’re the only one who can ever...”

“Keep my heart beating and never feeling wrong,” I whisper, finishing what I used to tell her when she had nightmares of our past hellish reality. Before I even realize it, I unlock the door and embrace her. I’ve missed her so fucking much.

When she is pressed against me, wetness hits my eyes. I’m crying like a fucking newborn baby with only the need for solace. I lock my door back and take her mouth, my hands gliding up the flimsy material of her dress, seeking the warm curves of her body. She doesn’t struggle when we land on my bed with me on top of her.

Her fingers caress my face as she stares up at me with glossy eyes. "I love you."

Undoing a button, I kick off my jeans and frantically shove off my boxers, dragging her pink lace panties off her toned legs with a crushing impatience that threatens to ignite in my chest and destroy me. I've never felt this overwhelming and urgent before. Her arousal glistens across her folds that I've dreamed about for so long now. I grasp her thighs and pull her down to me. My mouth latches on to her, my tongue parting her labia.

"Hero," she moans, pushing her hot little pussy in my mouth.

"You like my mouth on you, Naya? Say yes."

"Yes, Hero. I like it."

I part her folds with my fingers and spread her wide to kiss her clit, then I pull back to look up at her. "Tell me you love this."

Her thick lashes flutter, her eyes open and she looks at me with a darkened gaze and swallows. Holy shit! Her eyes are so fucking mysterious and sexy. My dick throbs and I feel pre cum oozing out. "I love your mouth, but nothing compares to you. I love you, Hero. Yes. I love your mouth. I love everything about you."

My heart all but jumps out of my chest. I lower my head to suck her clit into my mouth until she comes. I dip my tongue inside her tight hole and collect the sweetness there, thrusting my tongue as deep as it can go. My balls tighten and I almost come. She groans and whispers my name.

That's it.

I have to get inside her.

Right now.

Firmly gripping the base of my dick in one hand, I run the tip of it up and down her slit, causing her moan and squirm. I hold her hip down with my free hand and circle her swollen clit with the head of my cock and her hips buck off the bed. I continue to swirl the head of my cock around her clit until she comes. I aim at the entrance of her wet hole, drawing in a shaky breath, and I fucking thrust into her sweet heat with all my might, giving her all my weight until my shaft reaches the bottom of her pussy. God, it feels unbelievably good. I can no longer hold the joy the festers inside me when I howl out in pleasure as I effortlessly slide in and out of her silky heat, spreading her legs wider so I can go deeper.

God damn it she feels amazing. It's like poking my dick into a warm honey hole.

So sweet.

So warm.

So welcoming.

My arms tremble as I brace them on either side of her. After a few deep strokes it is so fucking difficult for me not to submit to the unrelenting urge and let myself go and come all inside her.

I take in lungs full of sustaining air and stare down at her, concentrating on her pleasure. Her swollen mouth is prated and her eyes are closed tight. The air is heavily scented with our lust, which makes my head heady. "Are you good, Naya?"

Her internal muscles clench around me and I hiss. "I'm good."

I almost pull all the way out before slamming back into her. Her breath hitches and her eyes fly open.

Holding her gaze, I fuck her as hard and as deep as I can until she's screaming all around me. I feel my dick bending inside of her. Her pussy holds me snug, giving my cock a tight embrace. Never have I seen a more beautiful creature in my life. Not one moment even comes close to this reprieve.

Her husky sounds of pleasure send me over the edge and she comes on me. In this implausible moment, a sea of luminous stars bursts behind my closed lids. I grit my teeth, pulling out and marking her with hot white ribbons on her abdomen. With my chest heaving and shaky hands, I rub my sticky seed into her skin like a body lotion. She's going to wear me like a badge of honor. I want to be inside her fucking pores. When she leaves and goes back to Lark, she'll still be mine. She'll forever be mine. I know it, and so does Naya.

The only thought that passes through my head as I stare at my glistening artwork smeared across her stomach is that this is not how an older brother looks after his younger sister.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *The Past*

*Hunter age ten*

*Hunter age nine*

*We lie in her bed together. Isabel cries so hard her whole body shakes. Her dad, Ivan, hung himself in the basement a week ago. His funeral was today. I held her hand the entire time. She never once let me go. I wonder why he did it. Didn't he know Isabel and Tyler and their mom needs him. He shouldn't have been so selfish. Now I have to work twice as hard to keep Isabel safe, to keep all of them safe from Grace.*

*I can do it.*

*I know I can.*

*I have no choice but to be strong for everyone, especially Isabel.*

*She really needs me now.*

*She cries and stuffs her face in my neck, throwing her arm around my middle and holding me tight. Her body shakes so hard mine shakes too.*

*"Isabel, I need you to listen to me." I stroke her long hair. "Do you think you can do that?"*

*She sniffs and nods.*

*“This is hard for you. I know this, but you can’t let this tragedy hold you back. You can’t let anything hold you back, Isabel. You have to keep pushing forward. Even when it hurts to breathe you keep going. You hear me?”*

*She nods.*

*“Tell me you hear me, so I know you hear me.”*

*“I hear you, Hunter,” she says through a low whisper.*

*“I don’t know what kind of people we’ll be in the future, but I can promise you that loving me will never hurt. I promise that I’ll always be there for you no matter what, Isabel. I promise that we’ll make it through together and come out stronger in the end.”*

*Her body jerks and she take a deep breath.*

*“Hunter.”*

*I press my lips into her hair and whisper, “I’m serious, Isabel. You’ll have no choice but to be strong because I’m going to be there to hold you up. I promise.”*

*“Okay,” she says, her tears stopping a little. “Me and you forever.”*

*I close my eyes and hold her tighter.*

*“Forever,” I promise.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *New Beginnings*

Heading down the sanctuary I sit in the fourth pew from the back, beside Hero and the rest of my family. Casting a long glance down the pew at Hero, Naya, Lark, Ivy, Blue, and Charlie, I wonder what we're all doing in church. They say Catholics are the worst sinners of all. I agree to that.

Throughout Mass, Hero tenses and becomes distracted by something. His eyes lose focus and he visibly shakes. Beads of sweat dot his forehead and upper lip. As soon as I think he's about to freak out, Naya takes a hold of his hand and gives his fingers a squeeze. He shudders and pushes down the madness for another day. I never got why Hero loathes churches and priests and religion altogether. Grace used to take us to Mass every Sunday. She was a devoted Catholic and made sure her children followed in her footsteps. Hero and Naya were involved with the church more than I was. I opted for piano lessons rather than joining the Youth Group. There was a scandal involving Father Morris around ten years or so ago—something about having sexual relations with young church members. But it was not publicized. The entire scandal was handled discreetly. I'm still unaware of all the details. But...if Hero was somehow involved, if he was somehow one of

the victims, then I'm positive he would have voiced his concern long ago.

Turning my head, I stare at Hero, wondering if he lied to me. His eyes gradually lift to mine. They're wide but vacant. He looks like an innocent little lamb lost among the flock. This empty look is brief and short-lived before he recovers. Hero gives me a smile so malevolent my spine stiffens and I settle back into the bench.

No.

Surely not a lamb but a stealthy cunning wolf in disguise.

If Hero were involved, I would pray for Father M.

I've seen Hero torture tactics and the kid is more cruel and vindictive than me.

There would be no place on God's green earth that Father Morris could hide. Hero would have sought him with every fiber in his body and made him wish for death that probably would never come.

After the scandal Father M left the church and never returned. Here I sit in the house of God with Isabel, a captive, in the dungeon of my adolescent home. Maybe I shouldn't underestimate what Hero is capable of either...

When I get home I make call to my agent Stanley.

"You ready to continue touring?"

I take a deep breath, staring blankly at my piano.

"No, I want to hold off on touring."

"What do you mean 'no'? We're making money, Hunter. Why the hell would you stop touring?"

"I need time off," I snap, thinking of Isabel imprisoned in my wine cellar.

"How much time?" Stanley asks, his voice shifting from anger to attentive unease.



“I don’t know.”

“That’s too vague, Hunter,” he pleads into the phone. “I need a date, a time, something.”

“I just don’t know, Stanley.”

“Okay. How about we revisit this in November?”

“November,” I agree, hanging up.

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I harshly clutch the steering wheel in fear I’ll beg Hero to stay. We sit outside the airport. Taxicabs and people are scattered around us, departing and kissing their loved ones goodbye as we sit silently in my car, looking straight ahead at the golden sunbeams breaking through the thinning clouds. Neither one of us is willing to acknowledge the significant farewell moment; the moment where we part from each other and venture on our own journey that life has in store for us.

“I love you, Hero,” I say, turning to see his reaction. He presses his lips together and swallows hard. He doesn’t like affection from me as much as he does with Naya. Hero is unable to absorb it. I can’t remember the last time I told my brother I loved him. But it needed to be said. It’s necessary.

“Love you too,” he mumbles below a whisper, his lips twitching.

“Don’t take shit people give you no matter how high the promise is. You get me? I don’t care if it takes you to

the fucking moon and back.” I will not lose my brother to drugs laced with shit nightmares are made of.

“I hear you,” he answers, nodding. “My lips are as sealed just like Mother Mary’s vagina.”

I lift a brow and he chokes on a laugh. “Keep your dick wrapped. Always. Do not fuck anything without a condom.”

“I’m not twelve, Hunter. I get it.”

We stare at one another for a heartbeat. He stifles a smile. But I can only hope what I can’t convey in words, I express in my expression, whatever that may be. He sighs and unbuckles the belt, opening the door. I get out and we smile at each other before I embrace him in a tight hug.

“Be smart and safe, Hero.”

“I will, Hunter. I will. I promise.” We hold each other at arm’s length and gaze into one another’s eyes before we release each other. I lean back against my truck and watch Hero head towards the airport sliding doors, toting his luggage behind him. This transports me into the past. Where I watched a happy and optimistic Hero enter his first grade class, dragging his large backpack behind his skinny legs. I was filled with trepidation as I am now because I would not be able to look out for him. But I was also overwhelmed with thrill, thrill that he gets to grow and learn from his own experiences. He turns and gives me a two finger salute before disappearing into the swarm of people and from my line a sight.

I’m going to miss my baby brother.

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I carry a wooden tray that holds a warm bowl of blueberry oatmeal and fresh orange juice along with two painkillers into Isabel's new room. She's asleep and sprawled out over the bed like a distressed fallen angel. Her dark hair is fanned all around her and is a deep contrast from the paleness of the snow white sheets. Sitting next to her, I place the tray on the stand that holds the lamp she kept on.

*Is she afraid of the dark?*

She smiles in her sleep and cuddles closer to me. I snort, amused because she's seeking comfort in the one thing that continues to hurt her. I poke her cheek.

"Morning, my sweet."

She groans, beginning to stir. The sheets fall a little, exposing the darkening welts on the backs of her upper thighs. The strangest emotions run through me. None of which are as satisfying as I thought they would be. I did that to hurt her. I can accept that. But can she?

Isabel eyelids flutter. There is a state of hazy obscurity where everything is wrapped in a protective orb and safe from the flying rocks of reality just before the brain wakes. I bet Isabel wished she stayed there in that sanctuary before she opens her eyes to her new reality.

I witness her orb of safety quickly crack and shatter before my eyes and, I must admit, it makes me smile. A very twisted and perverse part of me is elated that she recognizes and acknowledges that I own her, that she is no longer in control of what happens to her, that I am her

only source of nourishment. I have her life in my hands. It's mine to rule now.

“Are you hungry?”

She doesn't respond. Her wide eyes have never looked more vulnerable and defenseless.

I grasp her chin between my thumb and forefinger, lifting her face towards me. She screws her eyes shut maybe to avoid mine. I know she wants to recoil, but she doesn't. “I asked you a question.” She frantically shakes her head. “What did I say before?” I add more pressure to her jaw and she winces. “Verbally. I always want a verbal answer from you. Do you understand me?”

I watch with avid curiosity as her little pink tongue darts out to wet her cracked lips. “Yes. And no, I'm not hungry.”

“Are you sure? Lunch won't be served until noon.”

“Yes. I'm sure.” Despite her response, I release her chin and scoop up a spoonful and attempt to feed her. She keeps her mouth tightly clamped, so I raise the spoon to my mouth and feed it to myself.

“You know, this is really good. Sweet and creamy. I know you're hungry. You didn't eat dinner, and now you're going without breakfast.” My eyes roam over her slender form as she turns her head from me. It's a defiant gesture, but I'll let her have that, because that may be the only thing she gets to have. “What's your plan? Huh? To starve yourself?” My hand runs down the length of her arm, marveling at the soft flesh beneath my hands. She tenses and turns to stone beneath my fingers, understanding the extent of the unspoken threat of my simple touch. As much as Isabel hates to admit it, I own her in this very moment. “Well, Isabel, you don't even

have *that* luxury. You have no options here. I am your solitary source of sustenance. The quicker you understand this, the better.” I scoop up more oats. “Now, let’s try this again.”

Isabel jerks her head back when I place the spoon to her lips and murmurs, “Fuck off.”

I calmly set the spoon back in the bowl and place it back on the tray. Standing, I take my time when I shrug off my cotton shirt. Her head cocks to the side like a curious puppy. But when I undo my belt, all traces of curiosity vanish. It’s replaced with a building flare of fear, panic, and dread. She gasps and scurries across the mattress, concealing herself on the side of the bed as if hiding will keep her safe from me.

“Since you want options, I’m providing you with two.” Her small fingers bunch in the sheets as she braces herself on the edge of the bed. She does look quite defenseless crouching down like a small timid animal hiding from danger. I smile so wide my cheeks are beginning to ache. “Option one: you get up and sit on the bed and take whatever consequence you have earned. Option two: you stay exactly where you are.”

Isabel nervously peers over the bed. “What happens if I get up?”

“More importantly, what happens if you don’t?” I say through my smile. I’m obviously a sick and demented asshole, but I am arrogant enough not give two fucks about it, though. She’s mine to do whatever I please with.

Isabel slowly but gracefully rises to her feet and then she flops down on the bed. Her eyes are wide and alert. She seems skittish. “Please. I’m sorry,” she

whispers as I yank my belt free from all the loops in my jeans. Tittering, I drop the leather strap to the floor where it lands with a heavy thud. It's like a white flag between us, sort of. I'm not going to whip her again. I don't have the strength or mind frame for that right now, and I think she's not motivated by physical punishments. Fear is more her style. I can deliver terror if that's how she's used to learning.

She swallows hard when I stand directly in front of her and pop the button of my jeans free. I take her hand in mine and rub it against my face, lips, and then chest. Without warning and as soon as she gets used to the idea of touching me, I guide her hand down to my hardness and press her fingers there. Her eyes expanded and she frantically tries to pull her hand away, but I keep it there.

"If you keep up this disobedient behavior," I press her hand further into my hard cock, "this will be inside of you. I doubt Max has fucked you in a while, which means you haven't had much fucking in years. With the way I am feeling right now, I'd split you in two."

Isabel attempts to shake her hand free and I take this time to savor her fright. I close my eyes for a moment and indulge in the overwhelming predatory sensations that courses through me. I grin to myself, acknowledging the power I have over her, what I can do with or without her consent. Like the sun is to Earth, I am a vital part of her survival.

She *needs* me.

Sighing and opening my eyes, I let her hand fall away. "Do you understand me now?"

"Yes."

Taking in her flushed face and body, I smile inwardly at my triumph. It's a small victory but one nonetheless. "Right. Still not hungry?"

"No, I'm not hungry," she mumbles, looking down at her fisted hands in her lap. I bet she wish she was bold enough to use them to strike me.

"Fine." I take a seat in the chair beside her bed and eat her food, staring at her the entire time. "Kneel."

Her chin lifts as she glances at me. "What?"

"You heard me. Kneel."

Isabel's hesitant, but she glides off the bed and kneels eventually. "Crawl towards me." I watch her jaw clench as she does what I ask. I order her to stop when she's by my feet. "Now sit back on your heels and spread your thighs."

She gapes at me and I smile. "But—"

"No buts. Now." She does as I ask and I sit back in my chair and enjoy the view as I eat her breakfast, wanting nothing more than to eat her. "You wrote Max a letter telling him you went on vacation by yourself." Her brows furrow when she looks up at me. I dig in my back pocket and pull the envelope out, handing it to her. "Here, you can read it."

She takes the folded paper out and her eyes quickly skim each line. "It says I'll be leaving to travel and nothing specific."

I nod. "That's the idea. Now, lick it closed."

Confusion washes over her expression but she does what I ask and then hands it back to me. I put it back in my pocket. Max will get this notice from Isabel sometime during the week. I have to mail it off first.

"He will find me," she murmurs more to herself.

“I guess we’ll see.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Missing Mom*

Mr. Patterson sits across my kitchen table in his finest suit. He has a manila envelope tightly gripped in his clenched liver-spotted hands. He's my mother's lawyer. He usually deals with all her incriminating affairs behind the scenes. But today is different for some odd reason unknown to me.

I scratch my brow and smile. When I was a kid, I told this fucker what his client, my mother, did to us, in hopes he would somehow rescue us from our never-ending hell. He simply laughed it off and dismissed me without a second thought. He was supposed to be a good guy, a model guy that followed the rules and laws. I stood out in the corridor when he asked my mother about my accusation. She smiled and shook her head, handing him an envelope of his own. He stuffed it inside his suit jacket and never spoke of it again. It's funny how greed can make tragedy seem less serious and quite amusing. "Mr. Patterson, would you like some coffee?"

His bushy brows knit together and he clears his throat. "No, thank you. This won't take much of your time." He touches the small golden cross that hangs off a thin chain around his neck. "Hunter, as you know, your mother has been missing for three years now. She had, a

while ago, presented me with her will.” He slides the large manila envelope across the table.

I rip the top off the envelope and take out documents. Upon further observation I don’t like what I find. My eyes dart up to Mr. Patterson’s dark brown ones. “She left her entire estate to me.”

He frowns and touches his cross again. What a devout Christen he is. “Yes. You have the responsibility to split everything with your siblings. I can offer to help you setup trust funds, if you like.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I no longer need your help with anything.”

“I understand, but that is an extensive amount of money. It can be very overwhelming. I just want you to know that I’m here if you need me for any reason at all.”

He elicits a smile despite the anger boiling inside of me. I want nothing more than to rip the old man’s head off. But I can control my impulses, at times. “Mr. Patterson, this is no time for jokes. This is a very serious matter, don’t you think?”

He clears his throat. “Absolutely, forgive me for being insensitive. I just thought—”

“It’s best to leave the thinking to the scholars and philosophers. You are a lawyer. You should stick with the facts.” His gaze lowers and he smooths invisible wrinkles in his designer jacket sleeves. “Like the fact that my mother isn’t missing at all. The fact that she can’t face the ugly truth so she hides to indulge in her filth. The fact that you’re getting ten percent of,” I look back down at the number circled in red ink on the document, “two hundred point nine million. You should

stick to the facts, because you know very well where she is.”

Mr. Patterson looks out the window. I follow his gaze. Out the pristine glass windows is a spectacular view of the side of my green yard on a warm spring afternoon and there happens to be a black crow on an old oak branch nearby. “When the crows appear, the devil is near,” I say.

He jerks his head back and glances at me. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

“Just a little saying my grandpa told me.”

He looks down at the shiny face of his Rolex. “Well, it seems you have everything figured out here. It will take a few weeks for that sum of money to be wired to your account.” He stands and I walk him to the door. He stops and turns to say, “Hunter, you know, Brazil is fine spot to visit around this time of year. The beaches are beautiful.” I cock my head to the side as I watch him stroll to his Bentley.

*Brazil?*

And then it dawns on me: that’s where my mother must be. Did he feel guilty enough to divulge her whereabouts?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twelve*

*Isabel age eleven*

*Isabel sits in a chair at her kitchen table while she watches me make chocolate chip pancakes. I've learned how to bake. It's what I do whenever I feel sad. It's what I've learned to do to cheer up Hero and Naya. It came to me so easily. I go kind of crazy with the cupcakes and cookies when Grace leaves out of town for work. Naya and Hero always eat until they bellies ached. I turn my talents to Isabel while my dad is at home taking care of Hero and Naya. They got sick and I was in a baking frenzy.*

*"Wow. How do you do that?" Isabel asks as I flip the golden pancake to the plate.*

*I shrug. "It comes naturally, I guess."*

*"Yeah, but you've made, like, a ton and not one is burned. That's amazing."*

*Turning off the stove burner, I lean back to stare at her. "You think I'm amazing?"*

*She smiles at me. "I think your beautiful, Hunter."*

*My breathing gets heavy.*

*Her words are like a kick to the gut.*

*She thinks I'm beautiful.*

*"Isabel?" I ask, staring at her in wonder.*

*"Yeah?"*

*"When we get older will you have all of my babies?"*

*Red tinges her cheeks but she nods. "Yeah."*

*"I'm serious," I tell her, handing her the plate of stacked pancakes.*

*"Me, too."*

*When she tries to dive in with her fork, I take the plate away from her.*

*She frowns at me.*

*"Promise to have all my babies."*

*"I promise to have all your babies, Hunter."*

*"Okay. Good." I slide the plate in front of her and watch her dig in.*

*Isabel doesn't know that I'm going to make sure she keeps her promise, even if it's the death of me.*

*Isabel and I will be together.*

*She will have my babies.*

*She will be my wife.*

*She will be my everything.*

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Max

I turn over and stare at my alarm clock. It's 5:00 A.M. and I'm in bed alone for the third day of this week. This would be the part where Isabel greeted me with a kiss and a warm smile and asked if I slept well. Turning over to empty space feels unnatural and though Birthday is still with me, she can never replace Isabel. I keep replaying every second in my head like a movie set on rewind. When was the breaking point for Isabel? She left me. It's not her fault, of course. I was unable to be attentive enough. She didn't ask for the world. She just wanted me to be someone I couldn't. Isabel craved for such obscene and atrocious things. Such dark things. She asked so very little of me and I couldn't fulfill even that role. I was incapable to provide what she needed.

*"Hold me down,"* she used to whisper in my ear while I was still inside her.

*"Tie me up."*

*"Choke me."*

I could never do such unspeakable acts without feeling like some sexual perverted deviant. Though I

never acted on them, I wanted to. God, did I want to. My mind would get carried away while in business meeting with sick and indecent fantasies about defiling Isabel in countless ways. I'm getting hard thinking about it. I could never perform and give her what she needed without feeling like my father. I'm afraid if I lose control and bask in the temptation of wicked desire, even in the briefest of moments, then I'll become insane and every part of my rational sense will vanish. I don't know if I'm capable of separating the fanatical and sinful side of me from the ordinary me. It's better to stay safe; I have my father's blood coursing through my veins and I'm barley hanging on as it is. The evil will spread and infect everything if I feed the hellish monster inside of me. I harden as I think about Isabel's soft pleas for wicked things...

My reflection in the mirror looks gruesome under the harsh megawatt fluorescent bulbs in the bathroom. They reveal the deep purple bags under my eyes and my sickly-looking skin. I run my hands over the black coarse stubble under my chin. I need a shave. Continuing my morning routine, I avoid the mirror at all costs. I'm getting new low energy bulbs tonight; maybe in lesser light the stark truth will mute. After tying my blue tie and lacing my black shoestrings, I grab my car keys off the counter where I tossed them last night, but decide to catch a taxi to work. I'm not in the right state of mind to drive.

All my employees greet me properly as I enter the building. Displaying a mask, I smile and nod. But, I do, in fact, notice the small murmurs after I glide past them.

"...poor guy. Isabel's been missing..."

“...he’s doing his best. She left him...”

“...it’s not his fault...”

“...he’s probably happy she’s gone...”

“...wasn’t she crazy or something...”

“...but look at him. Why would she...”

“...who knows what happens behind closed doors...”

“...Max is a good guy, though...”

When I reach my office, I tell Mrs. Gray to hold all my calls. I shut my door, hang my jacket on the rack and sit behind my polished desk, staring out the grand widows like it’s just another day. But unlike any other day, I am not focused. My head just isn’t where it should be. All I can think about is Isabel. She’s probably curling her toes in the warm sand of a private beach off the coast of Spain somewhere while I’m here, worrying.

Pulling out Isabel’s letter out the top drawer of my desk, I reread it:

*Dear Max,*

*I love you so much. Please don’t blame yourself. I had to leave. The memories were becoming too much to bear for the both of us. You and I know it’s the truth. I felt like I was trapped in a box and left to suffocate. I can’t live like this anymore. It’s driving me insane. I love you but love is not enough this time. By the time you’ve read this I will be gone. I want to travel and visit the places I’ve always dreamed about and read about in those leisure magazines and pamphlets. I do apologize for not giving you the opportunity to say goodbye. I hope that one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me.*



*Love you always, Isabel*

Slinging a crystal paperweight angel that my mother bought me as a Christmas gift off the desk, I mutter a curse. The crystal shatters almost musically as it hits the wall. The glistening pool of shards gleams in hues of brilliant rainbows under the warm rays of the sun. I watch the colors bounce around for a while. She didn't mention the wedding that was only three weeks away. She didn't mention meeting her Aunt Lily, her mother's twin sister. Isabel was ecstatic to finally hear from her. We were all going to meet up with Lily, Taylor, and Rex around the time of the wedding. We had this planned in advance for months now. I don't think Isabel would leave something like this behind. She wouldn't just throwaway her future with me, or her future as an RN. She more than anything wanted to work at Cherry Creek Hospital.

*Would she throw her future away?*

This is all very strange...the vibrating of my phone pulls me away. It's a text from my ex Lily. I have been avoiding her calls lately, which astonishes me because I've been secretly searching for her for three years now. But she's just trying to check up on me and make sure I'm okay. She's trying to do the decent thing and I'm being difficult when I don't need to be. I haven't heard from her in three years, since she eliminated my heart. That wasn't entirely her fault either. She was too good for me and I didn't deserve her.

**Lily:** Hey. I know you're busy. I called twice yesterday and you didn't respond. I wanted to make sure your day was alright.

**Me:** I'm good. Thanks for asking.

**Lily:** Okay. Good. I don't want to bother you, so I'll let you get back to work.

**Me:** Where are my manners? Forgive me. How is your day going?

**Lily:** It's going...I have five minutes before my next class comes in, so I took this as a chance to text you.

**Me:** Thanks for your support.

**Lily:** You're welcome. I'm always here for you! =)  
Your mom wants me to come down soon. I think I will.

**Me:** Really? Are you going to finally tell me where you're living at now?

**Lily:** Max, please not now. I can't. My students are beginning to arrive. TTYL!

Staring down at her cell number in my phone, I lean back in my leather chair with a smirk on my face in spite of my current circumstances. She cut off all contact with me and refused to tell me where she moved to, no matter

how much I begged. Three years later she decides to call me when my life makes a turn for the worse.

*Maybe I will use this number to track her down.*

I glance back down at Isabel's letter.

*Would she really leave me when everything was just beginning to blossom for us?*

To be fair to myself, I am not ruling anything out.

Scrolling through my contacts, I find the head of my security team, Tie. "Hey, Tie. I want to get an envelope tested, maybe for prints too. And I have a number here. I need to know the location of its origins."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Hunter

#### *Complicated Endeavor*

This is the seventh day. I've had Isabel for seven days now and she still declines every meal I offer. She's weakening in a physical sense, but mentally she's strong and defiant and stubborn. It's going to take me a while to break her down mentally. I'm concerned about her physical health. The weight is melting off her and, honestly, it's starting to scare the hell out of me. She's too thin. I can count her ribs if I wanted. As crazy as this may sound, I didn't want to force anything upon her. Granted, I am forcing her to stay here. I am fully aware that she is my *captive*. But I wanted her to keep the illusion of her freedom. I wanted her to at least have choices when it came to certain things. I wanted her to have options despite what I said to her about not having any options.

I stand before her, holding a bowl loaded with mashed potatoes, cheddar cheese, and bacon. This isn't my best creation, but this is also loaded with calories, which she so badly needs. I have to restore her energy in the most efficient way.

She looks at me as I take a seat in the chair by her bed. Her hair is still wet from the fresh shower she took. I had to bring her more clothes and it was convenient

enough that Ivy and Isabel are the same size. Isabel looks beautiful in Ivy's clothes.

"I'm not hungry."

Instead of responding verbally, I reach out and fiddle the top button of her white blouse until it pops open. My eyes lift up to hers and I smile. She swallows hard, then looks away.

"Really, Hunter. I'm not in the mood for food."

I undo a button and then another. Her black lacy bra is exposed now and my fingers purposely graze the tops of her breasts. "If you keep this up, then you're going to be very bare soon. I doubt you want that. I'm satisfied either way, though. Your choice."

Her stormy eyes fly to mine and she scowls. *If looks could kill*, I think. My smile broadens. I *tsk* when she reaches for the bowl. She pouts and glances up at me. Scooping up some, I bring the food to her mouth. She's hesitant, but willing. Her lips wrap around the spoon as she focuses on me. She leans back and swallows. My eyes drop back down at the empty spoon. Thank God, she didn't spit it in my face. I feed her more and she accepts. It breaks my heart when I see how hungry she actually is. She finishes every drop. I watch her as she licks the last traces of mashed potatoes off her lips.

I cock a brow, leaning back in the chair. "You want more?"

She blushes for a reason unknown to me and looks away again. "No, thank you."

"You don't need to be embarrassed, Isabel. You know that, right?"

She nods, running her fingers through her damp hair that's beginning to wave. "Yeah, I know. Thanks. It was

good. I didn't realize I was *that* hungry. I can lick the bowl clean.”

“Do you want to?”

She shakes her head, avoiding my eyes.

“Would you like anything else? Something sweet maybe?”

“Mmm...” She glances at the TV and then me.

“Yeah, M&Ms and some popcorn. There's a movie coming on.”

When I bring her what she asks for, I leave back out. I don't know if it's my imagination or a misinterpretation of some kind, but Isabel appears upset that I leave her. I don't have time to dwell on it, though. I'm late to our little family dinner we're having at Lennáe, the finest restaurant in Cherry Creek.

When I reach my truck, I switch my hoodie for a black blazer and smooth my hair back with my hands. Dinner with Charlie, Blue, and Ivy should be interesting enough. Hopefully, I won't have to say anything at all.

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“...so I'm like, ‘Get your damn cat out from under the hood of my car.’ Can you believe I almost killed a ball of fluff? That would have been a mess that I wouldn't even touch,” Charlie laughs, draining his glass of wine.

Ivy giggles and Blue stabs the romaine lettuce in her salad to death. Ivy immediately stops laughing and everyone's eyes turn to Blue. Ivy reaches over to rub Blue's arm. “Blue misses Berry. I can't believe she ran

away and never came back. Berry loved you too much to just runaway.”

Picking up my goblet of sparkling water I sip some, in hopes of concealing my smile from Ivy. Honestly, I don't give a shit about hurting Blue's feelings. If it was up to me, I would unapologetically laugh in her face and tell her how much I think she deserved everything she got. I know that cat meant a lot to her. From what I understand, she bought it when she first arrived to the US ten years ago.

“You should let me buy you a new one.”

Blue's thin brows frown as her lips twist to the side. She rakes over her salad and takes a deep breath.

“Maybe in time. It's too fresh right now. Berry can never be replaced.”

I choke on a laugh that I tried very hard to stifle. Charlie reaches over to give me a few hard pats on my back. “You okay, boy?”

“Yeah,” I wheeze. “Went down the wrong hole.”

“Wouldn't be the first time,” Blue adds, smirking at me. “You have been gone lately, running off at odd hours of the night. Where have you been going, Hunter? We all are very interested?”

Clearing my throat, I cut into my grilled steak, biting the prime slice of meat off the sharp end of the knife with my teeth while fiercely staring at Blue. Her smile broadens and she bites her bottom.

*Shit. This is turning her on. The little psychotic devil...*

“He's been writing at the house he grew up in,” Ivy answers, glancing at me and smiles, “right, Hunter? It's

the big white one behind the giant gate, the one on the hill?”

“Absolutely. I leave whenever inspiration strikes. But of course, you know nothing about that. Do you, Blue?”

“Humph,” she mumbles, stuffing her salad in her mouth. “Inspiration and dedication are all things I know about, Hunter. Have you picked up the latest Forbes magazine? I had huge article in there. Do you even know what I’ve accomplished and how I renovated the fashion industry? You have no clue.”

I settle back in the leather chair, holding her glare that might scare the hell out of one of her minions but not me. I have seen scarier. “And I don’t give two fucks,” I laugh. “You seem to need a lot of attention, Blue. I can help you with that. Instead of acting like a horny dog humping the shit out of my leg and begging, just *ask* me. If you need a reference, ask Ivy. I’m very good at what I do. I can give you the discipline you so badly crave.”

A muscle in her jaw jumps and she slides all the elaborate china off the linen table with a simple swing of her arm. Glasses and plates along with silverware come crashing and shattering down all around us like an explosion of some kind of thunderstorm.

I ball my fists under the table to keep from dragging her by her locks and into the bathroom to demonstrate how much of disciplinarian I am.

People aren’t apologetic or discreet as they snap pictures on their phones. It’s the damn flashes that are beginning to aggravate me. I have learned one thing from Blue. When you’re at her pinnacle of fame, people



will take notice no matter what you're doing. In a way, we're like a huge circus. Our performance is us living our lives. When I began writing, my goal wasn't fame or wealth. I doubted I would become successful at what I loved to do. My sells were great already, but when Ivy, Blue, and I made the news as a couple... my sells skyrocketed into millions upon millions. I was content with my way of living. It was quiet. It was fitting. I didn't need everyone in my business. I didn't need the bloggers, the paparazzi, and the gossip magazines. So there is more than a little resentment that I hold towards Blue. She came with all that extra nonsense attached to her.

Blue stands and smooths her elegant white dress down, then she glances around at everyone who watches us. She calmly pushes in her chair and walks towards the exit. Ivy soon follows. Charlie asks the waiter for an entire bottle of wine, but soon I'm left at the table by myself with a very expensive bill.

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Ivy's silhouette is blurred by the steam that instantly fogs the glass. After tearing open a foil packet and stripping off my clothes, I slide back the sliding door and hop into the shower with her. If I don't release some sexual energy soon, I'm afraid Isabel won't be safe from me. My will is already weak enough. Isabel is like a helpless lamb and I am the wolf with not one good intention if I leave this house tonight.

Ivy faces the showerhead and soaps her body, ignoring me. My hands grip her hips, bringing her back towards me. She takes a deep breath and shudders when I kiss her back. “You didn’t have to say anything to her, Hunter. You know Blue is very sensitive.”

“She started it,” I whisper in her ear. “But you’re right. She wanted a reaction and I gave her one.” I let the warm water cascade down on us for a long moment.

“She acts so tough, but underneath all that hardness is a big softie. I’ll make her team Hunter in no time.”

“It won’t be any time soon.”

“Sooner than you think,” I say, digging my fingers into her skin.

“I’ve missed you.”

“I’m sorry. I have been neglecting you lately. I’ll get better. But let me at least make it up to you, love.” I swiftly roll on a condom, gathering her wet hair in one hand and kiss her naked shoulder. She trembles and I give her hair a yank, causing her to stumble backwards and fall against my chest. Before she can process another thought, I have her front plastered to the shower wall and I slide swiftly inside her. Closing my eyes, I release a pent-up breath that I’ve been holding all day. She grunts softly, adjusting to me. I simply take what I want from Ivy. It might be an inconsiderate move to other people who don’t understand what Ivy and I share and the inner workings of our relationship. She actually gets off this way. I take what I want because it’s my nature and Ivy is a willing participant of the depravity of it all. That is her nature. We each have a role to execute and we are each fully aware of what those roles are. But there comes a time when titles and roles are not enough. There comes a

time when affection and love and honesty outweigh everything else. There comes a time when trust will be the main factor and solid ground to build a solid foundation on. I adore Ivy, but in a totally different way. Comparing my love for Isabel and Ivy is like comparing the sun to the moon. There's a world of difference between them, but they both serve their purposes in a way I need right now.

Reaching up and grabbing a fistful of wet hair, I jerk her head backwards and nip her earlobe. She moans with every part of her body quivering as I effortlessly glide in and out of her. Though, I want to take my time with her and show her how apologetic I am, I don't. I'm brutally rough with her and I can't say that I'm concerned at all with her pleasure. But still. She should know. From my experience, women tend to do a lot of over thinking and guess work in their relationships. I don't want to put Ivy through that kind of torture. I want to ease her mind and I want her to be knowledgeable of what she does mean to me.

"Ivy," I whisper, kissing her neck and squeezing her supple breasts. Her body bucks when I pinch her nipples. "Shh. It's okay. You know how much I appreciate you, right?"

She nods and I add more pressure to her nipples, twisting them. She makes a tiny protest in the back of her throat. "You know I like verbal answers, love."

"I know, but I've been doubtful lately," she says breathlessly.

"Why?" I need to know what's going on inside her head. Sliding half way out of her, my hands clench around her hips. My fingers dig deeper into her flesh

when she pushes back, seeking what I took away. “Talk to me, love. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“You’ve been distant and detached. Something’s been on your mind. I felt like it wasn’t my place to ask if you didn’t want to share.”

“You’re right,” I say, easing myself back into her gently. She shudders but I hold her in place. “I’ve been swamped with work.” Taking advantage of this moment, I solely focus on her wants and needs. Reaching down, I touch the little bundle of nerves between her legs while my free hand continues to pinch her nipple. Her juices gush down my hand and her body instantly locks and convulses around me. Gritting my teeth I bite back my orgasm, stroking in and out of her. She is incredibly wet and tight and has a suction of a powerful vacuum hose and this makes it difficult to not succumb to the inexorable urge.

I hold her tight in my arms and whisper in her ear, “I’ve missed you, Tinker. I won’t neglect you anymore. I’ll get better.”

She moans out as I fuck her through her climax. I make her come three more times before I give myself that luxury.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age thirteen*

*Strange noises wake me up. Maria, my nanny, is in the next room beside me. She screams in Spanish at the telenovelas she watches there. Maria is good nanny to Naya, Hero and I. She even gives us Mexican candy—lollypops with spicy peppers inside instead of gum. Why do they have peppers in candy instead of gum? Gum is sweet, peppers are not. It doesn't really matter, because in the end we eat them anyway. Maria teaches us Spanish too. Hero and I have gotten quite fluent in Maria's native tongue. We talk about Mother at the dinner table, in front of her face and she has no idea. Mother doesn't like it when we speak in Spanish. But we do it anyway because that's the only freedom we have.*

*I love Maria, but she fails to keep me locked away in my room at night where my mother prefers me. At age thirteen I don't think I need a nanny.*

*But whatever.*

*I hop out of bed and tiptoe to the door, pushing down on the latch and opening it slowly. Poking my head into the glowing corridor, I make out the railing of the*

*grand staircase and the sparkling crystal chandelier beyond that. I've always thought of our house not as a home but as an extravagant and posh hotel that's fit for the standards of kings and queens. Everything is superficially rich here, but underneath the diamonds and luxury is nothing sustaining like love or affection, just a heartless frigid coldness that winter would be afraid of.*

*I creep down the long golden lit corridor to peep on Hero and Naya. They both are asleep and cocooned in one another's warmth. One can't do without the other; it's like they need each other to breathe in order to function. Knowing that they're safe, at least for now, I turn back around, pausing at Maria's cracked door. She sits in her rocking chair, scanning through the latest gossip magazine with her TV blaring while she laughs on her phone with her sister, I think, complaining about the Evil White Bitch.*

*I take in a lungful of breath and dash past her door, down the stairs and follow the path that leads to the cellar. They lock the door, but I've learned to pick the lock and spy on my parents. I blend in with the dim darkness and watch through the sliver in the door. My mother is chained to a wooden stake while my father stands before her, wearing some kind of weird leather mask like lucha libre wrestlers wear. He looks like those evil villains that are in my comic books. My body turns to stone when he deals out brutal open hand slaps across her face. She says nasty things to him and then he stuffs a rag in her mouth.*

*She wants him to stop, but my dad keeps hurting her. My mom does very bad things but she shouldn't be hurt like this, even if I wanted to kill her myself. My dad*

*picks up a thick belt from a hook nearby. My breathing is hard and my heart is beating so fast. I know what he is about to do. I know what comes next.*

*I squeeze my eyes closed when I hear the leather crack against her skin. Her scream is muffed by the dirty rag in her mouth. I ball my fists so tightly that my nails cut into my palms. I don't intervene because I am a coward. I can't bring myself to move any further.*

*I bite my lip so hard that I taste blood. He stops beating her at forty-two strikes. When I open my eyes, my father has my mother cradled in his arms. She cries and he shushes her with kisses like this is the most normal thing in the world.*

*Forcing myself to move, I head back up the stairs. My eyes sting so bad, but I refuse to cry. Fuck that.*

*I will not cry.*

*I will not cry.*

*I will not cry.*

*Why is my family so fucked up?*

*I make it all the way to my room without shedding a single tear. But in the refuge of my pillows, it rains. I must have made a noise because Maria is here, holding me while I thrash in her arms. I keep fighting, though all I want is to cry on her. She presses my head into her chest and holds me down until I give in. She's a strong woman in more than one way. I cry until the tears run out. Only Maria knows how weak I really am.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *Old Baggage*

Charlie gets up to answer the door. We were in the middle of dinner. I watch Blue cock her head to the side and then Ivy. I follow their curious gaze to the entrance of the dining room and see what roused their attention. Sally dressed immaculately in a skin fitting red cocktail dress with matching high heel pumps. I vaguely wonder where Chance is, her loving slave. She rarely leaves anywhere without him.

*The devil in a red dress*, I think.

I continue to eat, avoiding her altogether. She doesn't deserve the gift of my acknowledgment. A sexy smirk plays on Ivy's lips. Ivy knows all about Sally. Ivy knows everything, well, except that I keep Isabel locked away in the dungeon of my childhood home of horrors. Blue's gaze alters from curious to watchful to deadly in a matter of seconds. Blue is aware of who Sally is to me, which means she's aware that Sally is a threat to Ivy and Blue doesn't do well with anything that threatens Ivy. Blue and I have a common foe and I can't help but think this should be a reason to celebrate.

Out the corner of my eye, I notice Sally cross her arms over her chest and lean against the wall. Charlie



glances at me and then at Sally. He does this twice and then curses under his breath, snatching his plate and glass of wine off the table. Charlie moves his dinner upstairs. He knows that I can't tolerate Sally, but he doesn't know why. I never told him what she did to me. I don't have the courage. I swear Blue's irritation only peaks when Charlie leaves. Ivy must feel the undeniable tension because she reaches out and squeezes me and Blue's hand on top of the table.

"I love you, Hunter. I love you, Blue," Ivy avows, looking between the both of us.

"Hunter," Sally snaps.

"Love you too," I whisper, completely disregarding Sally.

Blue grips Ivy's hand in response.

Never one to be ignored, Sally walks up to the table and blatantly sits in Charlie's vacant chair. She grabs a nearby knife and viciously stabs the black placemat as if she wishes it was one of us instead. Ivy jumps and Blue simultaneously yanks the lodged knife out of the wood and has it aimed at Sally's jugular.

Running a hand down Ivy's back, I soothe the tense muscles there. I've learned to never display fear when Sally is around. She feeds off it. It's better to keep it suppressed and well hidden from her view. Ivy settles back in her chair, squeezing my knee under the table. Ivy isn't particularly strong when it comes to confrontation. But that's what she has Blue for.

"Hunter, control your pit bull, will you," Sally says through gritted teeth.

Blue adds more pressure to the knife against Sally's throat. "This pit bull will rip your spine from your throat."

"Blue, please," Ivy whispers.

Sally gasps when Blue nicks her beneath her chin before reluctantly removing the blade. Wanting to rid myself of Sally as soon as possible I give her the one thing she craves: attention. "Sense you have so kindly blessed me with your presence, what can I do you for?"

Snatching a napkin from under an empty plate, Sally holds it to her bleeding cut under her chin. Her darkening brown eyes land on mine and I have to force myself to keep the vomit down my throat, because seeing those eyes, those deadly familiar dark eyes causes me to become physically ill and utterly disgusted. It's unnerving in the most horrifying way. She represents everything I despise, right down to the very fiber of her high-end designer dress. Sally is simply a young modern day Grace. She helps herself to some wine and then she smiles malevolently down in her glass. "I see that Charlie's in town. How's family bonding coming along?"

"Great, actually. But I'm sure you didn't come all this way to concern yourself about my family affairs now."

"Plus, infliction of any kind of pain is sort of your thing. Right, Grace?" Ivy says through an impish grin.

Sally's brows raise and she nods her head. "Ivy is it? I'm impressed with you. You've done some research. Well, I've done quite a bit of research myself." Her darkening irises turn black as a moonless night and slides over to me.

My chest tightens and I squeeze the fork in my hand harder. Now I know that my suspicions about Sally's intent are all confirmed. She came to harm and destroy. That's the only will Sally understands. "Yes, quite a bit of research. Blue, are you enjoying your stay here? I know Hunter and he can be a bit... inhospitable at times. He means well, though."

Blue lifts a roll to her lips, taking a huge chunk from it. Blue's attitude towards Sally is so dismissive I could laugh if I didn't have to worry about vomiting first. "Another word from you to me, Sally," Blue says through a mouthful of bread without bothering to give her the simplest of looks, "and I will sever your tongue from your mouth and shove it very far up your anus. You will learn the real value of *shit talking* as the Americans say."

Ivy laughs and Sally swallows loudly. I entertain myself with the visual in my head. "It's good news that I've come to chat with Hunter, then." She takes a hefty gulp from her glass and looks at me. "Hunter, it doesn't surprise me that Caleb isn't here with you and Charlie. Like I said, I've done my research about you and your lovely new girlfriends. But more importantly, girlfriend is more like it."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Ivy asks, irritably.

Sally lips turn up on the sides. "Everything, sweet girl." She digs a folded piece of paper from her bra and hands it to Ivy. "Would you be a dear and hand that to Blue? I would do it myself but I'm rather fond of my fingers—pit bulls are such ghastly creatures at times."

Ivy stares down at the paper in her hand for a moment but then passes it to Blue. Blue unfolds it, her eyes narrowing on something I can't see.

"What is it?" Ivy whispers to Blue.

"Impossible," Blue murmurs.

Sally smiles and clasps her hands with a musical laugh from hell. "Hunter do you know why Caleb hates Charlie?"

"No. But I'm sure you're going to enlighten me."

"This cannot be," Blue breathes.

My stomach is tied in knots. Blue never wavers from the cold hearted devil she is. Now I'm curious about what's on that piece of paper she's holding. Whatever it is, it's causing her distress. Despite me and Blue's dislike for each other, it's not sitting well with me that Sally is upsetting her.

"Charlie has a way with the ladies as you and I know," Sally says, "But his little indiscretion is sitting right in front of your nose. How does it feel to be one big happy family with your new cousin, Blue? As I remember, incest was a hard limit for you, Hunter. No?"

The dread in my stomach intensifies when Blue's trembling hand comes toward me, holding the creased paper. My eyes scan over it when I take it. It's a copy of a picture. It's Caleb. He's dining outside a restaurant with a woman, who appears to be around the same age. I squint at the photo, attempting to see the woman's features more clearly. My heart skips a beat as I take in her face. The unmistakable blue eyes and blonde hair. It's like staring at Blue's twin. She's obviously Caleb's half sister and Blue's mother and my...aunt.

"Charlie!" I yell.

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## Isabel

A strong hand holds mine back as a cluster of feathers explode from the ripped pillow. My body tenses, bracing for the beating I'm sure will come. I've wrecked the room. I broke the mirror in the bathroom with the thought of a vengeful suicide on my mind. Hunter wasn't too careful. I wanted to prove that point to him. I wanted him to comprehend that I am still in control over me. But when it came to actually going through with it, I couldn't. I had the shard of glass right under my throat; my haunted reflection in the shattered mirror prevented me from the peace I wanted.

Infuriated at myself and Hunter and *everyone*, I took the jagged shard of glass and tore apart the mattress, sheets, and pillows. I temporally lost my sanity. I wanted to cause more damage but everything else was out of my reach because of the chains. Now the room is covered in a thick layer of white down. If I had an imagination I could pretend it was a majestic snowy wonderland. It was too quiet. I am alone way too often. It felt like I was losing my mind. I couldn't take it anymore. I needed noise, even if I was the one causing it.

"Beat me. I don't care anymore," I murmur into eerie silence with my chest heaving. "Maybe if you beat me hard enough, all of my misery will finally fade away and come to an end."

“I’m not going to beat you,” says a male voice.

Soulful brown eyes meet mine when I turn around. Taking in a sharp inhale, my fingers loosen around the shard of glass and it falls, clinking raucously when it lands between us. “Chance... what are you doing here?” It’s Sally’s slave, Chance. The one she brought with her that night she told me about the aborted babies.

He opens his mouth but I cling to him in desperate need to get out of here. “Please, you have to help. Hunter... I don’t want to be here. You have to help me escape, Chance. Please.”

His eyes roam over my panic-stricken face and then his gaze drifts down to my collar. Something in his eyes alters. He no longer looks perplexed. If I’m not mistaken... he looks envious. But of what, though? His slender fingers tap against the metal collar. “I’m not allowed to wear mine in public. You have the real deal, I see.”

My hands hold his outreached wrist. “No. I don’t want the real deal, Chance. I want out. Please help?” I release him when he drops his hand. My heart fills with glee and relief as he pulls out his mobile cell. I can be free of Hunter now. I can see Max again. God, do I miss Max. The thought of him and Birthday waiting at home for me brings tears to my eyes. I don’t dare let them drop though. It’s much too early to celebrate. Chance looks down at the phone in his hand and back up to me. He stares down at his mobile cell, at my freedom, with more hesitation and apprehension than I am expecting.

“Chance?” I whisper, my stomach filling with nauseating dread.

“I was supposed to call and report back to Sally,” he says as if I never spoke, “but I can’t tell her I found you down here. She’ll...” he doesn’t finish his sentence. Chance leaves it open for interpretation.

“You’re not going to call the police and help me get out of here, are you?”

His dark brows furrow and he swallows hard as he stuffs his phone back into his jean pocket. “Please understand, Isabel. I am helping you. It may not be in the way you wish...but in my own special way, I am offering you my services the best I can.”

I’m astonished and utterly baffled by Chance’s genuine words. But I can somehow understand completely where he’s coming from. He’s offering me aid by not reporting back to Sally. Going against her is something Chance probably never does.

“She would hurt me. Wouldn’t she?”

He studies me for a moment. “Hurt, yes. Harm, no. Sally is more merciful than you think. What Sally is... it’s just a persona. Nothing more. She enjoys manipulating people’s perception.”

“Aborting three babies isn’t merciful to me. Sally is just sheer evil. That is no persona Chance. You need to wake up while you’re still breathing.”

He snorts, unamused. “I can see why you think that.” Chance pauses for moment, contemplating on something. “If I keep your secret, will you keep mine?”

With my back to the tattered mattress, I spread my arms wide open like wings and drop like a fallen angel on the bed. Bits of fluffy white down fly in a flurry around me. This is my hell for now. I might as well make it my home.

Chance mimics my action and even more white feathers swirl around us. It's like we really are angels inside a snow globe. "I will keep your secret, Chance. But just... visit me from time to time. Okay? I feel like I'm going insane."

"I'll visit you when I can. If Sally catches on to me... it wouldn't be pretty. I love her, Isabel. She's all I dream about, all I ever wanted, all I care about. I wake up in the mornings and thank God she's still by my side. I have never been luckier. I love her."

Although Chance is speaking perfect English, I can't comprehend a single word he's saying. It's like he's speaking a foreign language to me.

*How can he love a monster like Sally Baker?*

"Secrets," I prompt. "I'm good at keeping them." Chance will likely be the only friend I get to see while I am in captivity.

"Sally didn't abort the babies." He inhales through his nose and stares at the ceiling. "She could never carry them full term."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Max

The envelope came back positive. It was Isabel's saliva, but something more interesting came back, as well—Hunter's fingerprints. I knew he was involved somehow. Running away is something Isabel would not do. She would not entertain such an absurd thought. She loves me. Now I feel ashamed that I doubted her loyalty, her love for me. A part of me is insecure when it comes to Isabel and Hunter's relationship. I will never have whatever hold Hunter has over her. Isabel and I will never have the type of relationship Hunter and her have shared. In truth, I am envious of him. He could truly have Isabel if she even second-guessed our relationship. But I won't let him come between us. Ever. Isabel will be my wife, even if I have to track her down and persuade her.

Reaching back to massage the stiff muscles of my sore neck, I stare down at the lab results again. Tie advised me that this is not substantial enough to convict Hunter of my allegations. It's strange that I need more evidence before there is an investigation. Hunter is not only the suspect here, he is the perpetrator. Hunter is guilty and I'm going to prove it...

Clicking through my email, I open up a link Tie sent me.

It's an article from Harrow Times about a local retired firefighter's daughter coming home to take care of her ill father in his final days. In the upper right corner there is a small photo of a frail elderly man in a hospital bed with a somber version of the girl that stole my heart so many years ago. Lily sits next to her father with tears in her eyes, clutching his hands in both of hers. I close my eyes as an odd relief floods me. I have finally found Lily...and she's in Pinner with her father. Lily fled to the UK. I have so many questions for her, so many things I never got to say.

Pressing a button on my desktop phone, I give my secretary a ring. "How may I help you, Mr. Gabai?"

"Schedule me a flight for Pinner, Greater London UK."

"Absolutely, sir. But, may I remind you, you have unlimited excess to your companies' jet. I could make sure it's fueled and ready, if you wish."

How easily I forget about the perks of being a CEO. "Great. We're going to hold off for a while, though. There is something I need to get done first."

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Failing to push my anger down, I slam my truck door and mount Hunter's porch. My fists ball painfully tight at my sides after I pound on the door. I wanted to do this the correct and rational way. Before I even attempted to confront him, I wanted to have a calm mind and I wanted to have my emotions under control. Half an

hour I sat in my car, working on breathing techniques before I got here. Nothing worked. My irritation only grew and peaked until I could no longer bear it. Just the thought alone of Isabel being held against her will and forced to do indescribable acts...has me fuming.

Hunter Knight.

He has Isabel.

He interfered in our bliss.

He caused this chaos in my life and it's about time he be penalized for it.

The door swings open and I have to compel myself from physically reacting on contact. My fists unclench. A teenage girl with long colorful hair dangling around her young oval face answers the door in a Batman pajama-styled onesie. Her eyes are a bit swollen from crying.

“Is Hunter here?”

“He left two hours ago, Max. He didn't bother to tell me where he was going. As if he would, anyway.”

My eyes narrow. “Have we met before?”

“Yeah.” She wipes her runny nose with the balled up tissue that she squeezes in her hand. “It's me, Ivy. We met once at Isabel's—”

“Yes, I remember now,” I say, interrupting her. “Ivy. You are unrecognizable. Younger. You look younger without makeup and heels.” In spite of her sniffing, she blushes crimson and looks down at her feet. I see why Hunter keeps this one around. It's almost scary how close she and Isabel resemble each other. It's not only their looks in which they are similar. Isabel and Ivy have some of the same traits, as well. The shyness

and nervousness of their timid behavior pushes my natural protective instincts into overdrive.

“I’m sorry about Isabel.”

“Me to,” I whisper, stepping closer and suppressing the urge to cradle her miserable face in my hands, willing to do anything to make her smile again. I have to remind myself she’s not Isabel.

Yes.

Pity the fool.

She gradually lifts her wide eyes to mine in a sweet and ingenuous kind of way. “Would you like to come in?”

A reason unknown to me, I smile. “I would love to.”

Ivy nods and steps aside, opening the door completely. Taking a deep breath, I cross the threshold. Golden light fills the living room area. I never took Hunter as neat freak. Everything is pristine and orderly. There isn’t even a watermark on the polished mahogany coffee table—he has crystal coasters. If he had any evidence from any wrongdoing, I’m sure he has enough sense to get rid of it long ago. Hunter is intelligent. Or so I assume.

Ivy locks the door and turns to face me. “Everyone else kinda left in a hurry. Is there anything I can help you with? Things have been pretty busy around here lately.” She gives me a big smile. Though, the smile is a spurious one.

“I’ll come back. I just wanted to ask Hunter—”

She hastily yanks her ringing phone out of her pockets. Ivy’s dark blue hair hangs around her face as she stares down at her mobile in her hand. The very ends of her hair are curly and brilliant turquoise in color.

“Give me a moment. But please make yourself comfortable. I would say ‘make yourself at home’ but I doubt you would want to live here.”

Shoving my hand in thick waves of my hair, I snort. “Smart girl.” I manage to get a real laugh from her.

“Sit or stand. Whatever your preference. This won’t take long,” she says over her shoulder. Nodding, I watch her go into the kitchen and take the call. Since I am here snooping, I don’t sit nor stand. I inch closer to the kitchen opening and stay perfectly hidden within the shadowy depths of the corridor.

“... Blue’s gone. She’s turned her phone off. Hunter. God, you should have seen his face. It was devastating. I thought he was going to go berserk. Neither one of them uttered a word after Charlie explained. It killed me to see them both like that. It’s been two days, and everything has gone to shit.” Ivy collapses on barstool and bangs her forehead hard against the edge of the marble countertop of the island. If she doesn’t stop soon she’s going to have a brutal bruise there. “Do you think we did the right thing? Maybe... maybe I should have told them that I knew, Caleb. Jesus. We should have said something.” She listens to the voice on the other end and takes a deep breath. “You’re wrong. They won’t forgive me if and when they find out I knew they were cousins all along. I would not forgive myself in their positions. They’ll hate me.” Her voice quivers as tears run down her cheeks. “I continued to screw the both of them knowing...” her voice drops to a low whisper, “knowing that they were related, Caleb. I am disgusting. I am an awful person. I can’t hate myself more than I already do.”

Hunter and Blue are related?

She said they are cousins.

Then that would mean Charlie was unfaithful during a period in his marriage. Caleb has a half sister, who has a daughter, Blue. It all makes sense now. I force myself to walk away from Ivy, who is losing her battle with tears and guilt and then I carefully exit out the door and proceed down the steps.

I glance at Hunter's truck. How strange. He left without his truck. Where has he been for the past two days? Not far, I guess.

Pulling the handle, I check the door of his truck. It's unlocked. Hunter's house may be immaculate, but his vehicle is filthy. There's trash and dirty clothes everywhere, in the masses. But a soiled piece of clothing stands out from all the rest. It's a cotton white shirt stained with blood. My heart races, so does the thoughts in my head.

*What the hell did he do to her?*

With swift fingers, I snatch the shirt from the mound of clothes and push it down within my suit jacket to conceal it. After quietly closing Hunter's truck door as if not to trip the alarm, I glance back at his house and Ivy still hasn't notice my absence.

Good.

Whistling, I start the engine of my SUV.

I got what I came for.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *The Past*

*Hunter age fifteen  
Isabel age fourteen*

*“Let me in,” I whisper, tapping on her closed window with my fist.*

*The lamp brightens the room when she turns it on, then she walks to open the window still half asleep. I climb in once she unlocks the latches.*

*“What are you doing here, Hunter?” she asks, rubbing her eyes with both hands and yawning, dressed in a white night gown girls wear.*

*“I came to sleep,” I say, squinting from the brilliant lamp that’s flooding us in too much light. “Turn off the light.”*

*She blinks the sleep from her eyes and stares at my face. Her expression is one of sudden horror. “Oh my god. Your face. What happened to your face?”*

*“Nothing,” I mumble, swiftly turning away from her. “I’m fine. Turn the light out, Isabel.”*

*“Let me see.” She catches my hand and grabs it when I attempt to pull away. Isabel yanks on my hand,*

*turning me back towards her. My gaze drops down to her cute Easter-yellow painted toes. I can't meet her eyes right now knowing I look like shit. She reaches up with her free hand to gingerly touch one of my swollen cheeks. "Aw, Hunter. What happened?"*

*The excruciating pinch in my heart intensifies from hearing her voice crack with so much sadness. "Turn off the light, Isabel."*

*Her thumb softly brushes across the skin of my split lip. "But your face—"*

*"Turn off the light," I snarl, getting frustrated that this perfect girl is seeing how flawed I am for her.*

*Her brows furrow, but she gives my hand a squeeze before she moves to turn the light out. Submerged in darkness, I can finally breathe again. I kick off my shoes, locking her room door after. I don't need anyone barging in on us. This is my time with Isabel. I've earned alone time with her.*

*I've earned this.*

*We both climb in her huge bed. Isabel is more than hesitant to get in with me, but she does. I pull the thick sheets over us while Isabel turns her back to me, tucking her hands under her stacked pillows and balling into a tight ball on her side of the bed.*

*I allow this until I drag her to me. She lays her head on my chest, snuggling closer. I wrap her up in my arms, breathing in her silky dark hair. We're both silent and that's okay. She doesn't have to talk.*

*I just want her close to me.*

*My fingertips trace small circles on her lower back, through her gown. Her body stiffens and then trembles.*



*She sniffs a few times until she loses the battle with her tears.*

*She's crying for me like the day we met.*

*I shut my stinging eyes when she presses her wet face into my throat.*

*"What happened to you, Hunter?"*

*I have to swallow twice because I'm almost strangled by the pain. "I'm okay."*

*She shakes her head vigorously, her small hands holding my neck like she's afraid to let go. "No, you're not."*

*This girl is persistent. She's not going to stop, so I might as well give her something. "I got into a fight," I lie.*

*"With who?"*

*"It doesn't matter," I lie again.*

*"Do you need to go to the hospital?"*

*"No."*

*Her thumbs idly draw tiny circles on the sides of my neck, mimicking what my fingers are doing on her back. I grin inwardly at this.*

*"You might need stitches."*

*"I'm fine."*

*"I can get you ice."*

*"No," I say, giving her a tight squeeze. "I need you here."*

*"I won't be gone long." She touches my sore jaw, placing a kiss on my chin. "I promise."*

*"No, Isabel."*

*"Then what can I do?" she asks, truly concerned.*

*I can't help but smile again. "Kiss me where it hurts."*

*She's less hesitant when she leans forward and skims her soft lips to my bruises. She kisses my cheekbones, my nose, across my jaw line, both corners of my mouth, then my lips finally. A warm sensation shoots down my spine at the feel of her lips on me. Her hands and mouth on me feels so good.*

*I need more.*

*I need so much more.*

*I'm going to miss her.*

*This will be our last time with each other.*

*She doesn't know this.*

*I'm cutting Isabel out of my life for her sake.*

*My mom will make Isabel's life hell if I keep our relationship ongoing.*

*I can't allow Grace to hurt Isabel.*

*She can hurt me all she wants.*

*Grace lives to hurt me.*

*"Kiss me again, Isabel."*

*She shifts on top of me, her warm thighs pressed on either side of my hips. She bends forward and the tips of her soft hair brushes across my face. Tingles go off like a burst of fireworks inside my body. Isabel gently molds her lips to mine. She stares into my eyes, only resting her lips on mine.*

*Groaning, I grip her bed sheets tight in my clenched fists. Fuck. That feels too good. I'm trying not to take over, because I know she's not ready for what I want to do.*

*"Kiss me some more, Isabel," I say hoarsely through a constricted throat.*

*Her pretty eyes darken. But when she runs her tongue across my closed lips, I lose what little control I*

*have. Before I can process my own actions, I'm on top of her, holding her hands above her head and pressing them hard into the mattress as my lips trail across her collarbone and neck. I lick down her the V at the top of her gown. Her chest swells and I can make out the dark points of her nipples through the white fabric. She trembles and gasps when my mouth closes over one.*

*"Hunter," she breathes when I begin to suck and taste her.*

*She tastes sweet.*

*So fucking sweet.*

*I release one of her hands to pull up the length of her gown. Kissing her softly on the lips, I lean back and look into her glittering eyes that shimmer in a heated way I've never seen. I get hard watching her and kissing her. "I'm going to touch you, Isabel."*

*She gives me a slow blink like she's dazed.*

*I cup her between her legs, running my fingers over her cotton panties. She releases a rugged breath and stiffens. "I want to taste you here. I want to touch you here."*

*Isabel blinks slowly again. "No one has ever touched me there."*

*Pride fills me when I smile down at her. "Are you mines?"*

*She licks her lips and nods once.*

*I grip her harder between her legs and her body bucks. "Is this mine?"*

*"Hunter," she gasps shocked, her face flushing.*

*My thumb moves over the heat in her panties.*

*"Answer me. Is this mine?"*

*"Yes," she replies, closing her eyes.*

*“Then that’s all that matters. I want to love you here in your bed,” I say, releasing her other wrists. “I’ll make this good for you, Isabel. I have you. Forever.”*

*“Okay, Hunter. I trust you. I’m yours to have.”*

*“Good.” I remove my hand from her panties and grip her hips with both of my palms, kissing her stomach and nipping her bellybutton through her gown. She shudders; her fingers curl and twist in my hair as I continue to descend down her body.*

*I might be fifteen, but I know exactly what she wants and needs. I’ve never had sex with anyone. All of my life, I have only wanted Isabel. I’m not nervous or timid when it comes to touching her. Everything is coming to me naturally. Isabel is the only one I ever wanted, so I’m going to experience how soft she is inside before I have to leave her forever.*

*“I love you and I need you, Isabel. I’ve only wanted you,” I declare, spreading her soft thighs. I settle between her legs and stare at her white panties, my heart thundering in my chest. This the most sacred part of her body and she’s giving this to me.*

*She’s giving herself to me.*

*My breathing grows faster and unsteady and my body is quivering just as much as hers. I’m fucking terrified now. I don’t want to fuck this up for her. But I want her too bad. I press my face forward, inhaling her heavenly scent. My tongue darts out of my mouth, ready to taste her and bring her pleasure.*

*I’m less than an inch away and then there’s a knock on her locked door.*

*I leap off the bed and she shoots upright, breathing heavily.*

*“Answer it,” I whisper.*

*She slowly gets out the bed, walking funny as she unlocks her door. I don't know who she's talking to. I'm too busy lacing up my shoes. Isabel's voice is small and soft. I'm going to miss her voice calling my name.*

*Fuck.*

*This isn't fair.*

*I hate my life.*

*Isabel goes out into the hall, shutting her room door gently behind her.*

*I wanted to give her me before I had to say goodbye. I wanted Isabel to give herself to me before I had to say goodbye. But this is better.*

*A nice clean cut from Isabel.*

*I have to do this.*

*I'm not going to be selfish like her dad.*

*I refuse to.*

*I will be better.*

*This is for her own good.*

*My gaze is centered on her closed door and the golden light spilling from the sliver of space underneath. I don't want to go. If I had a choice, I'd wait here in her bed forever for her to return to me.*

*I have to force my limbs to move because I'm hurting everywhere. Isabel is the only good thing I had going.*

*Now I have nothing but darkness.*

*Unlocking the latches, I lift the glass window up and let myself out, closing it after. Once my feet hit the gravel I take off, running as fast as my feet can carry me, not looking back.*

*I have to make the love of my life hate me from now on.*

*Pausing suddenly when I reach the massive willow tree brightened in the light of the moon, I push the tire swing once and watch it sway back and forth, seeing a sad six-year-old girl I fell in love with.*

*My eyes shut and I see her smile at me.*

*My eyes open I feel the ghost of her touch when her fingers touched my lip for the first time.*

*My chest burns as I struggle with something painful that's ballooning inside my body.*

*The pain is excruciating.*

*But I swallow it down and begin to run again.*

*I run and run and run.*

*I run until I'm surrounded by thick woods and chirping crickets and bright stars and the glittering river.*

*My legs wobble and give way.*

*I collapse on my knees, harshly gripping the dry fall leaves on the ground.*

*"Take it away," I mumble through gritted teeth, staring at the full moon and talking to God. "You owe me so fucking much. Now take this fucking pain away. Now."*

*A deer appears from the other side of the woods. It moves forward, taking a drink from the river with its gaze on me. It stares at me while it laps up the glistening water. I crawl towards the river. I cross the river and crawl to the deer. The deer lifts its head and looks at me. It doesn't run off like I think it would. No. Instead, it bends its head touches my hair with its cold snout.*

*I close my eyes and cry and shout into the ground  
until my body is wracked with tremors.*

*The unbearable pain slowly ebbs away until there's  
only rage left.*

*When I look up the deer is gone.*

*I rise to my feet, staring at the round moon that's  
shining its silvery halo on me. "Thank you."*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *Delusion of Illusion*

“What’s the matter? You haven’t said anything to me for the past two days,” I ask collecting Isabel’s used dishes.

She lifts her head and gives me a look as if the answer should be an obvious one. “You haven’t spoken to me in the past two days.”

Festering in my silence, I gather what I came for and turn towards the door. Isabel is oblivious to what’s happening right now. I want to keep it like that, for a while at least. I came straight to Isabel After leaving Ivy, Blue, and Charlie at the house and was surprised to see this place in a complete wreck.

“Wait?” The words are almost too low to be heard. Almost.

“Yes?” I ask, with my back still facing her.

She’s quiet for prolonged minute or so.

*What is she afraid to ask me?*

“Beat me.” Her whisper resonates within my soul. She evokes the darkness inside of me with two words. The images of her beautiful flesh marked by me are flashing through my head. It’s enough to proceed. I don’t. As much as it kills me, I don’t act on them. I need to know where this is coming from.



“Why?”

“I want...” She takes a deep breath as if she’s struggling to get the words out. “You like to hurt me. I know this. You haven’t been yourself lately. I want to be the outlet for you. I want to take your pain away.”

My throat constricts and I have thoughts of taking advantage of Isabel’s soft confession with every inappropriate scenario flashing through my mind’s eye. “Why?” Seems to be the only thing I can say.

“I don’t want to be alone anymore. If I have to sacrifice my body for only a moment of your time...then sacrificing my flesh is worth a few bruises to me.”

The dishes burst against the floor, shattering instantly. She stiffens when I embrace her with more force than needed. A perverse side of me takes over and rules every thought I now have. Pressing my lips to the shell of her ear I whisper, “You want to be my outlet? You want to sacrifice your body? Fine. I will not stop you, nor will I convince you otherwise. You say you want my time. Well, you’re going to earn every minute of it.” Grasping her jaw, I lift her face towards me and search her eyes. They’re hypnotizing midnight green almost black in color and just as beguiling and cheerless as I imagined. The depth of mystery she holds within those dark orbs has the potential to bring a man down to his knees and beg permission to explore such an unfathomable gift.

The unlimited power I want to wield over her is potent enough to get drunk on. I have never known intoxication of this quality before. This feeling of infinite domination is hazardous. It’s like flying too close to the sun. My wings are going to burn if I decide the

magnificent view is impossible to turn away from. The effect it has on me is indescribable and impossible to fully grasp.

Guiding her face up toward mine, I kiss her mouth and close my eyes from the headiness of it all. Her lips taste of sweet peaches from the bowl of sliced fruit she just consumed. Isabel stiffens and then slowly relaxes into the kiss. I pull back and stare at her just as she begins to respond.

Her pupils dilate as I peer into her enigmatic eyes and, at this very moment, I make a choice. I decide the view of the sun is worth burning for.

\*\*\*

## **Isabel**

After stripping naked, Hunter blindfolds me with a silk scarf and then he leads me by the collar to one of the bedposts. He brings my arms around it and links my metal cuffs together. I have no choice but to hug the wooden beam. My breathing comes out in little gasps. He hasn't even touched me yet.

"Isabel," he says into my ear.

Shuddering from the warmth of his breath against my sensitive skin and the heady proximity of his presence, I mumble a quiet, "Yes."

“Since this is not a punishment, you have a right to a safe word. I assume you know what a safe word is. Pick one. Now.” His words are clipped and impatient. I don’t have a clue as to what I’m getting myself in.

“Salvation.” Hunter told me he was my salvation. I’m not fond of that idea and this is the safest way to be vocal about it.

He presses a warm palm in the center of back, causing goose bumps to race over my skin. “Clever girl.”  
Shit.

He catches on fast.

I take that back, maybe in this instant this is the worst time to be vocal about anything. His fingers caress my back and then gently expand over my ribs. My heart sighs and I sway on the balls of my feet, intoxicated by a simple touch. “What are you thinking, Hunter?” The silence is too loud. I need him to say something.

I need him to talk to me.

I need him to love me.

“I’m thinking—” his lips glide over the tops of my shoulders and then he bites down on the small of my back—“that you bare back will be a lovely canvas to display my welts and bruises.” Stifling a moan, I lean into the bedpost to keep my knees from buckling.

My heart races when he removes his hand and whispers against the skin of my neck, “I’m going to beat you now.”

God, he’s going to beat me and I asked for it. How pathetically weak can I be? Why the hell am I seeking solace from my tormenter? Hunter’s going to break me. I gave him permission to rupture me and he’s going to love every moment of it...

The first strike of fire lands across my back, robbing me of oxygen. My muscles tense from the sharp pain. The second one is all-too soon and extracts breathy gasps from me. It feels like I'm being whipped with several strips of suede made of flames.

*What is he beating me with?*

Standing on the tips of my toes, I arch my back when the third blow erupts behind my knees. The pain doesn't fade. It builds the more I anticipate it. With each lick of fire, I stop caring about the number of hits and stop thinking about the moment it will be over. I flinch with each strike until I stop bracing for the next one and lose myself to the blazing fire. I no longer endure the pain.

I accept it.

I welcome it.

I thrive in it.

By accepting it, I find a new discovery. Underneath the blaze of pain lies a peaceful haze and within this haze I bask there and drown.

\*\*\*

## **Hunter**

Dropping the flogger on the floor, I stagger back, fully captivated by the scene before me. Isabel's flying.

I've never accomplished subspace with anyone before. Not even Ivy. She loves pain; Ivy can't get enough of it. Ivy is too much of masochist.

Strands of dark hair stick to her reddened glistening back. Isabel's pose is angelic, one of a fallen angel whose wings are now severed. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Her entire body trembles and she sags against the bedpost. That pulls me from my trance.

After undoing her cuffs and removing the blindfold, I prop my back against the wall with Isabel in my lap. I cuddle her to my chest and whisper reassurances in her ear while I stroke her wet hair. She turns her body into mine, seeking warmth. Removing my shirt, I wrap her in it. "Good girl. I'm so proud of you, Isabel. So Proud." She mumbles disjointed words as she nuzzles into me. "You've done well. Shh. It's okay. I'm not going anywhere. You have me right here with you."

All her responses are incoherent while she's in this state. But Isabel manages to make out three words with absolute clarity. "I want you."

Her eyes are glazed over with a barely contained passion I've never known. I watch her tears glide down the side of her face and into her hairline, I can't refuse her. I would be a fool to. I lift her trembling lips to mine and whisper against them, "You have me."

My hand drops between her legs and I run a finger through her slit. She's soaked. I dip two fingers inside of her and swirl. She groans, coming instantly. I strip off my trousers and pull down my boxers. My cock springs free like an escaped wild animal searching for vengeance for whoever placed him behind bars.

Lying Isabel flat on her back on the floor, I grip the backs of her thighs, pulling her down towards me and spreading her legs nice and wide. I grip the base of my dick harshly, wanting to chastise it for causing all this trouble and making me so idiotically stupid.

But there's no time for that.

Moving forward, I push inside of Isabel. She moans, shutting her eyes. Her internal muscles contract around me and I have to fight the urge to come. She's so fucking tight and slick. Isabel's heaven. I can fuck her until the sun rises and sets again and again, still never having enough.

Her fingers curl in my hair and tug hard by the roots. A grunt leaves my lips and I hiss from the ache throbbing through my scalp and shooting straight to my dick. I redirect her arms, bringing them around me so she can hold my sides or back. "Be my good girl and keep your hands there for me," I say, placing a kiss on her parted lips.

She nods and bends her head down to witness me effortlessly sliding in and out of her. "You're so big."

There's a sense of awe and fear in her voice and I can't suppress my smile or laugh. "Tell me you love my cock, Isabel."

She vigorously shakes her head; her eyes lift and narrow at me. She scolds me in her own way.

I have to bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing and smiling once more. My hand reaches out to swiftly capture her jaw. I stare into her wide green-hazel eyes. "No, baby?"

Isabel shakes her head again.

Moving forward, I force her lips open and thrust my tongue in her mouth. She surprises me when she doesn't pull away. No. Isabel starts to suck on my tongue, loving every second of it. I harshly roll her nipples between my pinched fingers and she cries out. I shove even harder into her, hitting her cervix and grinding down into her, giving her all my weight. "You love my dick. Say it."

"Fuck," she groans, tossing her head back and squeezing her eyes closed. She places her hands on top of mine to keep me from squeezing her nipples.

"Aw. My baby and her poor nipples," I whisper, laughing in her ear, thrusting deeper into her and biting down on the side of her neck and breasts until I leave red marks all over her flesh. Her pussy is grasping the hell out of me as she climaxes. She feels ridiculously good; her pussy is a vice made precisely to fit the mold of my dick. I almost come. But I don't. I stifle my orgasm and continue to savagely push into her, releasing a nipple to ruthlessly rub her swollen clit.

"I love your cock!" she screams through her tears, her arousal running all over my hand.

"It loves you, too," I laugh breathlessly in her ear, coming inside her. I still pump in and out of her wet heat, riding the waves of my orgasm. She makes a noise in the back of her throat and grinds down on me, using my softening cock to come again.

Fuck.

I don't think I can stop if I tried.

Isabel's going to be the death of me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *Brazil*

*Two days later...*

Sighing, I drop my short blonde wig on the lush snow-white carpet of our hotel suite. There is plenty of space here. It's like I have an apartment all to myself, complete with a living room area, a fancy kitchen with Top Chef appliances, and marble bathrooms. But I'm still confined to this luxurious suite. Hunter has all the doors locked from the outside. I can't even go out on the balcony and enjoy the breathtaking view of this private island we're on. Everything's been private and very discreet thus far. After that amazing night with Hunter he suddenly left and came back with a short blonde wig and fake passports. We boarded a private jet soon after. He didn't tell me where we were going, but I knew we were somewhere in Brazil once we landed. We rode through the thriving streets of Rio de Janeiro and then boarded a sleek boat built for speed. After a long while of flying through the open sea, we came upon a large island complete with a functioning luxury hotel and staff. All the natives speak Portuguese and Spanish. I don't know exactly where we are. I know we're off the coast of Brazil.



This is our second day here on this stunning island. Everything outside of the pristine floor-to-ceiling windows is lush and green with jungle-like vegetation. The ocean is crystal blue, reminding me of Hunter's eyes. And the sand looks like white powdered sugar. I would give anything to curl my toes in the sand and feel the spray of the cool sea on my skin. I even miss the warmth of the sun. A flock of white birds spew from green treetops, flying over the beach. The only thing I can do is touch the perfectly painted picture of it on the glass of my window.

I reach up and touch the metal collar around my neck. I am a caged pet. Blowing out a frustrated breath, I begin to cook. I don't want to watch TV. Or sleep. I'm restless and cooking is going to keep me busy. Cooking is going to distract me. The fridge is stocked. There's enough seafood here to have a seafood feast, and that's what I'm going to do. I cut slim slices off a lemon and watch avidly as the clear juice seeps out and stains the wood on the cutting board. I can take on a new character as well. Here, in this moment, I don't have to be Isabel Waters held captive by Hunter Knight. I can be Chloe Miller. Chloe Miller is on her honeymoon with her husband Cody Miller. Cody Miller has a risky job as a mob boss with people always after him and that puts his newly wife in danger. Cody prohibited her from venturing out to keep her safe while he attends to business. The mob boss never gets a break, crime never sleeps. Snorting a laugh, I watch the crab boil. I'm just as fucked in the head as Hunter.

The sky is deep blue with streaks of coral pink and orange as the sun dips behind the green mountains of this

island. The food has gone cold and the candles have completed melted. I sit at the polished mahogany table, tired and feeling abandon when Hunter finally comes through the door. He wears his frustration on his face as he kicks off his boots and glances at the table. Whatever he has been doing all day has taken its toll on him. He looks tired and pissed.

I don't say a word. I simply sip from my glass and silently thank God the fridge held a very good selection of wine.

His eyes travel over the table, taking in the uneaten food and little glass jars of burning wax. "What's all this?"

"My husband doesn't love me," I weep, playing the role of Chloe Miller. "He takes me away to this beautiful island and leaves me in a locked room to rot."

His eyebrows furrow and his eyes narrow. He's silently asking the unvoiced question. *Have you lost your mind for real this time?*

Holding his gaze, I continue. "My husband leaves me when I need him. I love my husband very much. He's the sweetest man I know."

Hunter's face is now severe. His blue eyes are cold shards of glacial ice. "If this is a game you're playing it, then drop the act. This isn't remotely funny. I've had a long day. I'm not in the mood."

"My husband is so mean to me, so cruel, so cold. I love him anyway," I reply, feeling way too good to stop my word vomit. Antagonizing Hunter may not work in my favor. If you poke a grouchy bear with a stick, the chances are you're going to get bit. Brutally. I'm

buzzing from the rich wine and I feel invincible right now. Nothing that Hunter could ever do will hurt me.

He has me captive.

I'm here's whether I want to be or not.

I have no choice.

That leaves me no choice.

Hunter scratches his brow and snorts a humorless laugh, helping himself to a glass of wine. He pours the blood-red wine in the fine crystal goblet and sets it precisely on the edge of the table. His darkened eyes shift to me and he smiles malevolently. "Wife, come here."

I swallow nervously and my heart flips with that direct order. Lifting myself from my chair, I make my way over to him, pouting like a real brat. He pushes my back against the table and grasps my jaw, staring down into my eyes with more intent than I'm comfortable with.

"I love my wife." His warm lips press to the corner of my mouth, his nails from his clenched fingers on my chin biting into my skin. I shudder from the gravity of his words and the solemn way he says them. "I love my wife. I would never deliberately neglect her. I've had a bad day. The worst. But now that I'm home, I'm willing to express my appreciation." He drops his hand from my face and begins to unfasten the row of white buttons from my blouse. My heart is beating wildly in my chest when he slowly removes my shirt, tossing it on a floor. "I don't want my wife to doubt my love for her. I don't want my wife to feel unappreciated." In move too fast for my eyes to process, he grasps my hips and lifts me onto the top of the table. Hunter's eyes are blue fire

flames when he stares at me. His heated gaze is as tangible as his powerful touch. He hands me the half-filled glass of wine he poured. "Drink, wife. Talk to me. Tell me what you're feeling."

"I'm lonely."

His fingers idly play with the button of my denim shorts until it pops free. "And?"

I sip the wine and drain it to calm my anxiety. Hunter is showing me that he's willing to play along. This is backfiring. "Scared. I need love. I want to be loved. And I don't like it when you leave me alone for long periods of time. I feel like I'm just your play thing, a pet you amuse yourself with when you're in a generous mood." Which is the truth.

Hunter's fingers grips the waistband of my shorts, pulling them down along with my panties. He unhooks my bra and flings it off. Hunter unapologetically strips me nude. All of my clothes lay crumbled on the floor and I stand naked in front of a fully clothed Hunter.

Once again I've put myself in a vulnerable position. Once again I've laid myself bare for him to feast on. Once again I've asked for it.

His lips are feather-lighter as they spread soft kisses across my collarbone and down the center of my chest. I shiver, groaning when his tongue touches the erratic pulse behind my ear. With a trembling hand, I reach out and grab a fistful of Hunter's blond locks, wrenching his head back. My gaze roams over his severe face that's strained with potent passion and lust. I'm stunned when our eyes meet. The penetrating look in his enigmatic gaze is enough to overwhelm me and drown me. I'm

going under fast. He hides the power, control, and influence he wields over me so carelessly.

My other hand is badly shaking and I'm in danger of dropping this empty wineglass until he takes it from me, placing it back on the table. His supple lips move along the edge of my jaw to the shell of my ear. "Tell me what you want, wife."

I have to stifle a moan when his hand forcefully cups the back of my neck, squeezing firmly. "I want to be loved."

He gives my neck another squeeze. His touch is covetous and possessive. His stormy eyes level with mine, his expression grave and chiseled from stone. "Good. Now tell me what you need."

His clamped fingers around my neck have a profound effect on me. I feel that touch everywhere. "I need you."

"You need me?"

"Yes," I confess in a soft whisper.

Hunter leans down and presses a gentle kiss on my open lips, pulling back before I can reciprocate. "Then you shall have me, wife." He shoves my legs apart, then slips a finger into me and circles my nipples with my arousal, taking his leisurely time licking it off.

His hand tightens on my throat when I whimper and move. "I want you still."

"Okay."

Hunter trails kisses of fire down my stomach. When his hot mouth is on me, I screw my eyes shut and begin to moan, wanting to cry because I hate myself for wanting him this way, for needing him this way. I try to suppress my orgasm for as long as I can, but Hunter nips

my clit with a sharp bite of his teeth and harshly shoves two fingers inside of me simultaneously, forcing me to convulse and climax.

I almost roll off the table but he holds me in place, flipping me flat on my belly. My cheek is pressed against the cold wooden surface of the dining table and his hand is wrapped fully around the back of my neck, keeping me anchored.

My heart soars when I hear the zipper of his pants go down. It seems as loud as gunshot. He grazes his heated erection down my slit and I groan, clamping my shaky legs together. He prevents this and wedges a demanding knee between my thighs and spreads me wide, keeping me open to receive whatever he deals out. He presses the tip of himself into me while he keeps me bound and pinned to the table by my neck.

“Hunter,” I whimper, trembling from pure need.

“I own you. That means I can do whatever impulses that pleases me. You are my pet, a play thing I amuse myself with when I’m in a generous mood. You are mine to break and mine to put together again. Who owns you, Isabel?”

“Please, Hunter.”

He adds more pressure to my neck, thrusting ruthlessly into me and then eases back out in the same swift movement, leaving me empty. “Who owns you?”

“Please.”

My breath is cut short when he surges into me again, ramming into me so hard that the entire table pushes forward, the wooden legs screeching against the floor, and the air leaves my body. He withholds himself from

me. It's causing my mind to go in a frantic state of desire. "Who owns you, baby?"

"You, Hunter," I admit in a soft cry.

He pushes back in and eases out over and over again until my face is wet and I'm blabbering nonsense. I dig my nails into the polished edge of wooden table and draw in a shaky breath. "Hunter. *Please.*"

He places his thick erection into me and begins to steadily thrust in an unforgiving rhythm that seems to loosen my joints. "Who owns you? Say it again."

"You own me," I whisper, feeling myself getting slicker. This is sick. Something's wrong with me.

"I own you. I will always own you. Forever and completely. Tell me who you belong to, who you love, whose body is this?"

"I'm yours. I love you. I'm yours."

"Yeah," he grunts cockily, removing his hand from neck only to place it between my soaked thighs. His expert fingers find my clit, rubbing vicious circles until my hips buckle. I come so hard my back spasms.

He pulls out, swiftly turning me on my back. We're face-to-face when he sinks fully into me. Hunter shuts his eyes and bows his head once embedded in my heat. His beautiful muscles in his thickly corded arms are strained and bathed in a sheen of sweat. His damp blond waves dangle around his visually stunning face. Hunter is undeniably beautiful. How could anything be so effortlessly gorgeous and so fluently cruel?

His heavy breathing comes out in rapid grunts that he releases directly in my ear. I feel myself clench around his hardness just to assure that I'm not dreaming. When his stormy eyes fly open, I'm mesmerized by their

intensity. He stares into my eyes, slanting his head to the side. I'm unsure what he finds in my gaze, but he gives me a grin so conceited and dominant that I feel my core tighten from it.

"You're mine, Isabel." He slides in and out of me, leisurely taking his time and savoring everything. "You're mine whether you like it or not." He is simply enjoying the feel of me. I know I should be ashamed of the soft, squelching sound I can hear from how wet I am. I could never deny him of anything. I know this. He knows this. He knows that I know this.

Hunter's thrusts are deep and long and very pleasurable. He bends his head and bites my nipple and underneath the sides of my breasts. Sharp pain ripples down my spine and swirls low in my abdomen. "I love you, my sweet Isabel." He presses his full lips to mine and gives me a gentle kiss, rocking evenly against me, slowing the molten orgasm that threatens to overwhelm me take me over. He pauses a moment to stare into my eyes. The brutal intensity with his gaze is more than I can conceive. "I love you. So much."

My trembling hands reach out and brace on his strong shoulders, trying pathetically to shove him away. It's like trying to shove a statue. Hunter's all solid muscle. This is too much. Hunter is too much. Fierce anger swells in my chest as I watch a tiny arrogant smirk on his lips. He has me just where he wants me. Hunter wins this round. Hunter wins every round. But I have one weapon I can use against him that will surely hurt Hunter. "I love Max. Not you, Hunter."

His expression changes from overly confident to uncontrolled fury. His unforgiving eyes narrow, scolding



me in the process. He doesn't verbally respond, but his body does. Hunter speeds his brutal thrusts hitting a sweet spot inside of me that I've never felt before. He bites at my neck and breasts and presses his punishing mouth and teeth all over me. My body blossoms and comes to life, receiving everything he gives. Pain turns into pleasure, pleasure into intense pain. My body is stunned when my orgasm rips out of me. It's painfully pleasing.

I don't have time to take in a breath when he turns me over again, pushing into me in a vicious pace. "You're just so fucking wet, Isabel. I can just glide right into your pussy. You love this cock, don't you?"

"No," I pant, helplessly on my belly, feeling like an abused sex toy. I'm lying. I know it and he knows it.

"Yes," he snarls, reaching between my legs to pinch my clit. "Come. Now."

My abdomen tightens and I come again and again. He curls a firm hand in my hair, sorely gripping a fistful and wrenching my head back to expose my throat. "Your pussy is milking the hell out of me, baby. Whose body is this?"

"Yours," I mumble through silent sobs.

"That's right," he growls between thrusts, capturing my wails in his mouth. His hands slide down the curves of my sides, grasping my hips. His fingers will discolor my skin with marks of ownership. "You're fucking mine. Mine. Mine. Mine." His final thrust is so powerful I know I'm going to be bruised from it for days. We both collapse on the floor, sweaty and out of breath.

"I'm hungry. I can definitely eat now," he laughs through his labored breathing. I know that this should be

disbursing, so I don't understand why I'm laughing softly when he cuddles me into his body.

Rolling out of his embrace, I stand and grab his cold plate off the table. I sit in the floor across from him and set the food in front of him. He sits upright and begins to earnestly eat. I'm helpless to stop a giggle escaping my mouth as I watch him dig in with his fingers. He's eating like it's his last meal of the year.

His amused eyes gradually lift from the plate in his lap to mine. I wipe pieces of crab off his mouth with my hand. Hunter smiles, the skin around his eyes crinkling. "You spoil me."

"It's nothing new when it comes to you, Hunter."

He holds my gaze steadily and blinks, his brilliant smile boarding. "I love you."

My heart flutters and I have to swallow twice before I can speak. "I love you more."

His expression is one of elation and relief.

The love we have for each other is addictive and explosive. I just gave him a dose of my affection, which is like a dose of pure heroin in Hunter's case. We get high on love and drunk on hate. It's an abusive cycle. And like addicts alike, we come back to score again and again, never achieving fulfillment and true satisfaction. Hunter and I are gluttons for the love, intensity, and chaotic madness we feed each other. The more we suffer for each other, the more pleasure we get. There will never be a time where we will have enough of one other. There is no point of saturation for us. No point of retreat. However, there are times of peaceful remission. But the bliss of remission isn't long enough to ever recover.

Threading my fingers through his soft hair at the nape of his neck, I settle between his long legs, feeling like this is just where I am meant to be, like I was born to be at his side.

His strong arms come around me, placing tender kisses across my naked shoulder. I close my eyes, releasing a pleasurable sigh.

Relapse has never felt so good.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *The Past*

*Hunter age sixteen*

*Isabel age fifteen*

*She's at my damn locker again. It baffles me that she constantly waits on me as if I would change my mind, as if I could change my mind. I undo the lock and take out my English text book, ignoring her completely.*

*I slam my locker shut and before I walk off, she grabs my upper arm, her small fingers burning into my skin. "I missed you last week and the week before that and the night before that."*

*My heart is about to burst in my chest. I shake her off, glaring down at her with all the hatred I can muster—the hatred for my mother, the hatred because of this situation that I don't want to be in.*

*When she begins to cry I whisper through gritted teeth, "Don't you fucking dare. You're going to make a scene and, if you do, swear to God, Isabel, you're going to regret it."*

*She nods stiffly, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her blue sweater. She grabs the back of my shirt with tightly clenched fingers when I try to move past her. The cold breeze blows over my exposed skin as the fabric*

*stretches out. I break out in goose bumps there. My heart thuds heavily. The sound of an erratic pulse reverberates throughout my body. My mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton when I try to speak.*

*I keep my back facing her; it's the only way I can keep sane. "Let me go, Isabel." I hate saying that when I really want her to hold on tighter.*

*Students give us odd glances as they pass through the halls. Neither one of us moves until the late ball rings, once the corridors are clear, I drag Isabel by the elbow into the girls' bathroom. I back her into the corner of the wall and glare down fiercely at her. I feel like an enraged bull about to trample a helpless bunny.*

*She stares down at her shoes for a moment, then finds some kind of resolve and slowly meets my glare. Her eyes expand and her lips part, a slight pink tenting her paled cheeks. My heart cracks and then shatters into a billion tiny pieces that are too sharp to ever be touched again.*

*I close my eyes and press my forehead to hers. When she looks at me like that, I feel a strange sort of warmth take root inside of me. That warmth she blesses me with is weird and significant. I have never felt or knew it existed before her.*

*Her fingers reach out and trace my eyebrows, nose, and lips. Such curious fingers she has. They never fail to leave my skin tingly. I open my eyes and stare into the dilated pupils of hers. Never in my life have I wanted to be more selfish. If I could, I would wrap my heart snugly around Isabel and make her a part of me. We would be two hearts beating as one. At this age, I know that Isabel is the love of my life; I know that there will never be*

*another Isabel. At this age, I know that Isabel is meant for me and I was made for her. I was put on this earth to love and protect her.*

*She is my purpose.*

*She is my world.*

*She is why I was created.*

*When she reaches up to play with the hair at the nape of my neck, the sleeves of her sweater rise, exposing red tally mark scars on both wrists. I take her wrists in my hands, gingerly running the pads of my thumbs against the angry scarlet welts there. She shivers violently and tries to pull away but I keep her anchored to me.*

*I know she does this because of me. I am the reason for her despair. I hate this. It was never meant to be this way. Isabel whimpers. It's a strange sound; one of pleasure, distress, and pain. I look at her face, which is barely contained in the throes of anguish and gratification.*

*She likes this?*

*Testing this theory, I press my thumb nails into her scars. Her breath hitches, coming out faster. Holding her gaze, I add more pressure. Her eyes expand and her breathing turns into shallow little gasps, her cheeks flushing. Incredible warmth settles in the pit of my stomach, spreading all over. My entire body is alert and alive. Tenderly, I stroke her inflamed scars to soothe her, then she trembles and does an odd twitching movement, her muscles jumping and jerking. Her knees give way and I hold her wrists tight as I watch her knees bend.*

*Did she just come?*

*Isabel is kneeling in front of me, panting for breath she can't seem to catch. I feel myself get hard. Her glossy eyes are wide and her face is a deep shade of red. Her body can't stop shaking. Looking down at her with her wounded wrists in my hands, I come to the realization that I enjoy hurting Isabel, maybe even more than she enjoys getting hurt by me.*

*What the hell does that mean?*

*Will I always relish in hurting girls?*

*Or do I only take pleasure in hurting Isabel?*

*I love her.*

*I shouldn't want to hurt her, but I do.*

*I do really badly.*

*I'm ill that's the only explanation there is.*

*Something is wrong with me.*

*Frustrated that my father and mother's twisted and sadistic ways rubbed off on me, I drop her wrists and take a step back to look at the heap of beautiful, quivering flesh sprawled on the tiled floor. Staring at Isabel gasping for breath, I feel like an abusive asshole.*

*Yeah, I have to end this because I'm going to take too much pleasure in breaking her. Collecting my cool, I walk back up to her with a false superior sense of myself. "This ends now. You don't have any communication with me. At all." When I take a step back, she reaches out and desperately grasps my boots, her fingers clenching tightly. My heart does a heavy and painful squeeze.*

*God damn it.*

*She's making this more difficult than it needs to be.*

*Gripping a handful of black silk, I cruelly grab the back of her head and jerk it up to face me. "Disobey me and I'll fucking destroy you." Without another word I*

*storm out the bathroom before I break down in front of  
the one person who ever gave a shit.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Mother Dearest & Letting Go*

Today, I'm meeting Grace at her villa. I had to take a speedboat to reach her isolated island in the middle of nowhere. It took a lot of threats to get her corrupted lawyer to disclose her location. I have fame, which is power to divulge what a dishonest crook the best southern lawyer is. He didn't want that. He has a family and a lucrative reputation to keep.

Now I sit in wooden chair with a cold glass of lemonade in front of me like I'm here on vacation. She has me waiting in her private enclosed garden and deck with an outside cabana that provides a shaded area from the flaming yellow disc that burns high in the sky.

The three platinum rings on my left thumb glints in the sunlight. I never take her rings off. Last night Isabel asked me if she could visit the beach. I told her we could both lounge on the shore when I return. She was extremely excited. I haven't seen her eyes light like that since we were young kids. My intention wasn't to prolong her suffering when I took Isabel. All I wanted to do was make the pain go away for her. I feel like a fool

for going through with this unachievable plan to rescue Isabel from herself. In the end I feel like maybe I should be rescuing Isabel from me. I see the me I truly am and I don't like him. Not one bit.

“What a pleasant surprise it is to see my son.” Grace appears from around the corner. She dressed in an crisp white loose pantsuit. Her head is wrapped in a silk black scarf. She looks thin and her bones look brittle and weak. Grace looks sickly.

“Mother,” I greet snippily as she takes a seat across from me.

“How are you? I hope you're doing well. You look great—strong.”

“Let's skip the formalities. Shall we Mother? I've came a long way to talk to you.”

“Yes. I'm aware,” she smiles, never breaking her southern belle character. Her politeness is simply a character, a mask of sorts.

“Did you have anything to do with Ivan's and Isabelle's death?”

“Absolutely not. I loved Ivan and I would never plot against him.”

“What about Isabelle?”

Her red-painted lips press together grimly. “I didn't have anything thing to do with her suicide either. Isabelle was...tortured.” She pauses to fill her teacup with a stream of steaming lavender tea and then sips from it. “It was true that I envied her, but my pity for her outweighed any jealousy I harbored by far. After Ivan passed she just couldn't cope. Isabelle was a tortured soul, really.”

“You know, I find that very unlikely when you’ve been keeping surveillance of Isabel’s family since I was little. Why did you have pictures of them?”

“I needed to know Ivan was happy. That’s all.”

“When did you meet Gabai?”

“We went to Stanford together.”

“You had his child. Hero and Rex are only eleven months apart. How did you keep that under wraps and why did Mrs. Gabai go along with it?”

“You were very young, Hunter. Do you remember my trip to Paris?”

I nod. Of course I remember her trip to Paris but only because I was so happy when she left. I didn’t have to walk on eggshells and Caleb was home a lot. He seemed to enjoy my mother’s absence as well. Grace stayed gone for almost a year. “You hid you pregnancy while you were in Paris.”

She touches her thin silver necklace with her eyes fixed on a spot on the table. “Rex was such a well mannered baby. Jolene couldn’t have more children after she gave birth to Max. She considered it a blessing that I gave her Rex. Jolene has always wanted more children.”

“I assume Caleb didn’t mind you getting pregnant by another man?”

She laughs softly and then coughs into her napkin. “Caleb wasn’t concerned with anything I had going on. Your father can keep himself busy enough to not worry about us. You should know that, Hunter.”

“You seem to have an answer to everything. How about why you kept us locked in cages in the barn?”

She coughs into her napkin again and swallows hard. “I’m dying, Hunter. Let’s not bring up the past. It’s rather depressing.”

I snort un-amused. “Are you seriously telling me this right now? I fucking lived it. You locked us in cages for animals. You left us there for days. We didn’t have food or water. You left us in the dark and in our own filth, and then you came to hose us down only when our fear got the better of us.”

“I’m dying, Hunter,” she repeats, looking into my eyes where I do see an emotion that resembles remorse. Yet I don’t think she’s asking for my forgiveness.

Laughing a humorless laugh, I shake my head. “Really? Of what?”

“They’ve found a cancerous tumor in the frontal lobe of my brain. Symptoms of tumors affecting the frontal lobe could be anything up to personality change, disinhibition, which includes loss of inhibition leading to offensive behavior that may be out of character for that person.”

I can’t conceal the dumbfounded expression morphing my features. “So you’re blaming all that on a brain tumor?”

When Grace is about to respond she chokes on a gurgle and brings her napkin to her mouth and releases a cough in it. The balled up white napkin is splattered with brilliant blood that seeps through the fabric, staining it as she crumbles it in her hand. “No. I’m not blaming what I did on anything. I am simply stating the facts. I was ill Hunter, but maybe if I would have gone to the doctors more often, they would have caught it faster and your childhood along with Hero’s and Naya’s would have

been spared. I know it's much too late to ask for forgiveness and redemption. I don't expect you or your brother to forgive me so easily as Naya has." She takes a deep inhale and turns to gaze at her exotic flowerbed. "I will offer you an apology anyhow." Her glossy eyes shift to me. "I'm sorry for everything I've put you through. I'm sorry that I wasn't a mother to you. I'm sorry that I never once offered or gave you comfort. You should have had loving hugs and sweet kisses." She takes a deep breath, wiping at her eyes. "I've failed you and your brother and sister. I've failed you all."

For the first time in my life I feel something close to compassion towards Grace. She was a terrible mother. It's because of her that Hero, Naya and I are all scarred and tarnished. Grace has marked us all for life. In this moment, I can't bring myself to feel completely sympathetic towards her. "What about Lily Stewart, Isabelle's sister and Isabel's aunt? Where is she?"

"I kept her here on this island. She agreed to leave after Isabelle married Ivan. Lily and Isabelle were adopted by Blain Stewart. Blain was a... wicked and cruel woman. She was very cold. I favor her in the ways I wish I hadn't. Lily was a lost soul back then. She didn't have much money and Blain was her only option. Her best friend and twin sister was getting married and Lily had a baby she could hardly take care of. Then there was Smith and Omar that endangered her life as well. I told her that I had my own private island in the tropics and she was welcomed to stay as long as she liked. She agreed and left soon after she gave birth to Taylor. Lily wanted to take Taylor with her, because Taylor's father died in a motorcycle accident. Taylor still had her

father's father, John, to take care of her. I convinced Lily to leave the child in Cherry Creek so Taylor could get to know Isabel and Tyler."

"Why did you want to help Lily?"

"I suppose, I protected her because of your father. He loved both Isabelle and Lily. I knew he would never love me in the ways he loved them. I won your father by default. We won each other by default."

"Where is Lily now? Isabel's been looking for her."

"Lily is with her daughter and Rex. They reside in the Rockies. I've heard they have a spectacular view of the mountains and a lovely home."

"So this it, then? The mystery is solved?"

Grace gives me a weak smile. "I don't know, but that is all the useful information I can provide you."

"Well, I guess there is no reason for us to be talking," I say, standing from my chair.

"Wait. Please," she rasps, through her severe coughing. She takes an envelope from inside her jacket pocket and slides it across the table to me. I pick it up and scan the front. It's to Hero. "Hero is the only one I haven't recently talked with. I want him to know things time will not allow me to tell him. I would be extremely grateful and thankful if you could please give him that."

Giving her a nod, I walk off and leave her coughing and gagging where she sits, wondering who is this new woman I was just conversing with. Our lives would have been utterly different if this New Grace raised us.

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Isabel and I lounge on the beach. She sits in my lap while I hold her close. It's night and the sky is dark, the stars are shimmering high above us, the unbelievable glow bouncing of the ocean's reflection. I told her everything that Grace told me and I have yet to feel better about any of it.

"Why didn't Taylor tell me they found Lily?"

"I don't know. Maybe she didn't feel like you were ready for that kind of news," I say.

She wraps her arms around me, sighing into my neck, placing a kiss there. Isabel is going to make what I'm about to do difficult. She's been very attentive and clingy lately. This is my fault. I trained her to be what she is and now I'm going to set her free just as soon as she's getting comfortable in that submissive role. "Well, I'm glad Taylor has her mom back."

"Yeah, me, too," I whisper, running my hand down the length of her silky hair. "I have to talk to you about a few things."

She smiles and her lips softly touch mine before she pulls back to look me in my eyes. "Yes?"

"I love you, Isabel. So much. You know that, right?"

She nods, caressing my jaw. "Yes. I know."

"You also know what I did was wrong, really wrong. I shouldn't have taken you, Isabel. I'm so unbelievably sorry, baby." Digging in my pocket, I pull out her real ID and passport along with the fake ones. I lay them beside her in the sand, then I take out the key and unlock her collar, removing it from around her neck. "I can't do this anymore."

Her pretty hazel-green eyes are brimmed with glistening tears. Her shaky fingers reach up to touch where her collar used to be. “But I love you, Hunter. You can’t... you can’t just let me go.”

“Isabel, you are free. You can turn me in, if you like. I will not fight you. I am letting you go. There’s a duffle bag full of cash on the bed in our room. You can leave here, right now and go anywhere you desire. Anywhere in this world, Isabel. You can use your real ID and passport, or you can stay missing by using the forged one. It’s up to you. I can’t... I won’t continue to keep you captive.”

“Do you remember our wedding day?”

“We were never married, Isabel,” I say, standing with an unbearable ache surging throughout my chest.

She yanks on my arm and uses me to pull herself up. “We might as well have been. You don’t remember our wedding?”

I say nothing.

Her eyes fill with tears and her expression is one of frustration, or maybe irritation. “Hero and Tyler were there and my parents put the whole thing together, even Caleb showed,” she says softly, tears rolling down her cheeks.

We did have a wedding day. It was a beautiful ceremony complete with a real alter covered with a perfusion of orchids and white roses. We all wore white. Isabel had on a white tulle dress with her red Converse and a white braided daisy flower crown on top of her head. Her father gave her away and we said vows. It felt real. But we were only children.



I relax the features of my face to utter blankness and unconcern for her tears I'm witnessing. "When we were kids? That was a long time ago. Things have changed. We have changed."

She nods, wiping at her tears that continue to spill down her cheeks. "You told me you would never let me go then." I'm stunned when she wraps all of her limbs around me suddenly. She holds me so tightly our frantic hearts almost beat as one. I want to shove her off me so the pain won't hurt as bad and at the same time hold her forever so she can never get away from me. "So you can't leave me now."

"Isabel—"

"No, Hunter!" she yells determinedly, her arms growing firmer around my neck. "No. I want to be with you. I love you. I want to marry you. I want have all of your babies. I choose you, Hunter. Only you. Please."

My heart almost splits in two from the overwhelming pleasure I get as those words leave her mouth and sink into my bones. She'll never leave. I have her right where I wanted her, but now that I've come to my senses... this entire situation we're in is a very disturbing and wrong. There's only one thing left to do. It's my solution time and time again when dealing with Isabel.

I have to break her once more.

"Isabel," I snap in harsh voice, wrenching her head cruelly back so I can look into her wide eyes. "Remove yourself from me this instant. Or so help me you'll be entirely too bruised to move within the next week." It's almost comical the way she jumps off me. "I want you to take your IDs and passports into our room and lay them

on the bed and then I want you to treat yourself to warm bath with lots of bubbles and oils. I want you to stay in there a good while. After that, I expect you to be kneeling at the door for me. I need you to follow these orders step by step. Fail to comply will result in severe punishment. Do you understand?”

I watch in utter fascination as her pupils dilate.  
“Yes.”

“Go. Now,” I mutter with a dismissive wave.

Releasing the pent-up breathe I’ve been holding, I turn my back to her before I can watch her leave. But then I pause a moment, debating on turning around to look at her. I’m not strong enough to do that, though.

Balling my fists at my sides, I grit my teeth despising myself for everything I’ve done to her and everything I’ve continue to do to her. Only when I think she’s out of sight do I walk away and leave for the dock. The boat seems to speed through the dark ocean much quicker than my racing thoughts.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### *Welcome Home Committee*

Closing the door to the taxi, I make my way up the paved path that cuts throughout my green yard. I'm surprised when Ivy swings the front door open and runs into me, sobbing nonsense. I don't understand a single word through her tears.

"Shh. Calm down and tell me what's wrong," I say, stroking her back.

"The police are looking for you. They have a warrant out for your arrest."

My brows frown as I pull back to look at her. "A warrant?"

She nods slightly against my chest. "For Isabel's disappearance..."

The thundering sound of helicopter blades flying high above in the midnight sky mutes her voice. The brilliant helicopter light shines on us—temporarily blinding me. I squint up at the beam of white light as the wind from the rotating blades attempts to blow us away. Soon there are multiple officers running from their vehicles and bombarding me. Ivy is snatched out of my arms and I'm wrestled to the ground with my hands behind my back and my face in the dewy grass.

I get cuffed and a mouth full of dirt.

\*\*\*

I know for sure that the four bleached brick walls and poor lighting is intentional and adds to the somber effect of this tiny room I'm being held in. I'm seated in an uncomfortable wooden chair, cuffed to a metal-topped table, staring at the spotless mirror embedded into the wall across from me.

Yes.

The physical layout of an interrogation room is designed to maximize the suspect's discomfort and sense of powerlessness from the moment they step inside. The physical manipulation begins before the interrogator opens their mouth. I know there are people behind the sheet of glass intently watching me, waiting for any sign to convict me for life. The Knights have made many allies in Cherry Creek but just as many enemies as well.

The side door opens and two detectives walk through. One is tired-looking middle-aged man in a boxy suit that I immediately know and the other is an attractive Indian woman who wears a ruffled white blouse and a snug gray panicle skirt with black shiny heels. Her long hair is held in a silver clip that threatens to cave from the weight of her twisted bun.

The woman smiles at me. "Morning, Hunter Knight. I am Detective Amber Takia," she points at the solid male at her side, "and this is Detective Steve Baker. We're here to ask you a few questions. Would you like anything before we start? Water? Tea? Coffee maybe?"

How stupid do they think I am?

I smile back at her, but I guess it isn't a pleasant one because her smile instantly falls.

Good.

“Yes. You can get me something: My attorney, Mr. Patterson.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### *The Past*

*Hunter age sixteen*

*Isabel age fifteen*

*I watch Isabel and Falcon parade their relationship and affection throughout the halls of the school. It's like their flaunting it. I fucking hate that they're together. But Falcon was my best friend and he's the only one I trust with Isabel. He'll take care of her in all the ways I can't.*

*My fists ball as I watch them eat lunch together.*

*She laughs at something he says, leaning fully into him.*

*He kisses her hair and feeds her a slice of green apple.*

*I go numb as she gives away my smiles and my laughs.*

*Someone tugs on my sleeve and I glare at a nice-looking pale girl with red ruby-colored hair. "Hey, you're hands are bleeding."*

*Unclenching my bloody fist, I shake her hand off me. "Fuck off."*

*Her green eyes grow wide, her quivering lips  
parting in shock. I watch as tears form in her eyes.*

*Oh, shit.*

*She's about to cry.*

*"Look, I'm sorry—"*

*She runs from me, her pale green eyes filled with  
tears.*

*I'm a dick.*

\*\*\*

*The halls of Cherry Creek Hospital are busy with  
passing nurses and doctors. I'm sitting in a chair at a  
nurse's stations while I complete a form for  
volunteering. I want to play piano for the kids in the  
oncology ward. From what I've heard I'm good at it and  
these kids deserve any talent I have. I'd like to make  
their suffering less intense by offering the only thing I've  
been good at so far.*

*A nurse, Rebecca, introduces me to the small group  
of volunteers. Most of which are old and elderly but  
there is a girl I recognize immediately. She's the girl  
with flaming red hair and summer green eyes. I smile at  
her and her face pales. She swallows and lowers her  
gaze to the floor. Rebecca tells me her name is Candy.*

*When the introducing is over, Rebecca dismisses us.  
Candy is the first to shoot up from her seat.*

*"Hey. Wait," I call after Candy, following.*

*She halts and turns to face me, her cheeks blotched with pink but her eyes are hard glittering emeralds.*

*“What? You’re mean. I don’t want to talk to you.”*

*“Hey. Stop for a moment,” I say, gripping her hand tight in mine when she tries to walk away. “Just give me a moment to apologize.”*

*The strap of her satchel falls down her shoulder. She pushes it back up, scowling at me. “I don’t have time. I have to go.”*

*“Why are you in such a rush?”*

*Her gaze shifts to a fixed spot beside my head, her eyes losing focus. “I have a date.”*

*My brows almost reach my hairline.*

*This little shy girl has a date.*

*I don’t believe her.*

*“With who?”*

*She frowns at me, holding her satchel to her chest with her free hand as if I might snatch from her.*

*It’s so obvious she’s hiding something.*

*What’s in her bag?*

*It’s only one way to find out.*

*“Please. Let me go.”*

*“Sorry for being mean to you,” I say and then I let her go because we’re drawing too much attention for what I’m trying to do.*

*Her gaze locks onto mine, her eyes are so cheerless that my heart threatens to weep for her. “Me, too,” she whispers before opening the door to the stairwell of the exit.*

*I glance around to make sure no one is watching me, then I follow her. I follow her up ten flights of stairs and up to the rooftop of the hospital. The girl with long*



*crimson hair stands on the edge of the ledge of a twelve story building. The ruffles of her pastel green skirt sway in the wind. It's windy up here and there is a certain chill in the air that has nothing to do with the temperature. The violent gust of wind blows her hair around. Her hair seems to come to life, red erratic flames flying everywhere like a tornado from hell.*

*"Why'd you follow me?"*

*"You needed me. I'm glad I'm here," I say breathless, my heart beating in my throat.*

*"You should've come." She turns to the side and carefully places one foot in front of the other, balancing herself on the width of the cement ledge like she's walking on a beam, but there is no mat to catch her.*

*It's only the black asphalt road down below.*

*She halts suddenly and bends her knees with her arms spread wide at her sides like wings.*

*My heart almost jumps from my mouth. "Don't do that. Get down."*

*She laughs at my pathetic plea. "Why?"*

*"Candy, get down. Now," I order, inching closer to her.*

*Her empty jade eyes lift up to mine. "Don't come any closer, or I will toss myself over the edge."*

*I have to swallow twice before I nod. "Please get down, Candy."*

*"Why?" she repeats, her interest truly peaked.*

*"Because," I have to force my stiff lips to move, "I want to get to know you, and I can't get to know you if you jump. So please get down."*

*“No one wants to get to know me,” she replies somberly, looking down at her feet as she balances herself.*

*“You’re wrong.” I take a chance to get closer while she’s staring at her white shoes. “I do.”*

*She looks up at me, her expression surprised. “You do?”*

*“I do.”*

*Her eyes water. “You aren’t saying that to be nice?”*

*“No. I don’t do nice. I’m saying I want to get to know you for you. I’m not vowing false promises to anyone, not even a pretty girl balancing on top of a hospital roof.”*

*She smiles at me, clear tracks rolling down her face. “I’d like to get to know Hunter Knight.”*

*I inch closer. “Good. You like chocolate chip cookies?”*

*She nods eagerly, her red locks flying everywhere. “Yes.”*

*I grin at her. “I make the best cookies. I’ll make two dozen for you. But you have to get down first before we make this deal.”*

*Her eyes light with a gleam I’ve seen in Isabel’s eyes. “Deal.”*

*But she falters when she takes a step.*

*I move, but I witness her*

*falling*

*down*

*down*

*down.*

*I throw my arms over the ledge of the brick building and catch her by her wrist. She collapses on top of me when I pull her up.*

*We both laugh breathlessly and humorlessly. It has to be the adrenaline from all this life and death action.*

*“I know who you are,” Candy says quietly.*

*“Everyone knows who you are. You’re Hunter Knight. You’re on the football team.”*

*“Well, I can’t wait to get to know you, Candy.” I yank on a long red lock of hair. She blushes hard, her entire face turning beet red.*

*Candy will work.*

*She’s shy and she doesn’t look like Isabel.*

*I can at least try to move on.*

*She tells me her suicidal letter is in her satchel along with every person that has mistreated her within the last week.*

*My name was the last one.*

*Number fifty.*

## **PART III**

# **CONNECTING THE DOTS AND CROSSING THE T'S**

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

**Max**

Pinner, Greater London UK

Breathing in the fresh damp air, I step out into the busy streets of Pinner surrounded by wooden pubs, antique shops, and restaurants. I went to Lily's father's house. Tie was able to find his address for me. But sadly, I learned, from his neighbor, Mrs. Seaborn, that he passed last Tuesday. She also told me that Lily was around the corner at the neighborhood park.

My breathing halts and I pause in my tracks when Lily comes into view. The sweat seems to bubble and boil in the back of my neck. She looks like a summer dream in a flowing yellow sundress and white strappy sandals. She sits on the bench with other women, laughing freely as the wind blows her dark hair across her face. I swear that same gust of wind blows her flowery scent deep in my nostrils. Lily fragrance jump starts my heart, and I'm not thinking when my feet carry me to her.

All I know is that I want her and I can't seem to reach her fast enough.

Her smile vanishes as I step in front of her. She blinks and then narrows her pretty brown eyes as if in denial that I am actually here. “Max?”

“Lily,” I breathe, gathering her in my arms before she has a chance to stand on her feet. Her arms settle around my neck and I squeeze her to me. “I’ve missed you so much, Lily.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” she whispers as I continue to embrace her with all my might.

She hugs me and strokes my back in a soothing motion. “It’s okay, Max. Take second and breathe, honey.” Only when she pulls back and touches my face do I realize my cheeks are wet.

Fuck.

I am a grown man sobbing in the arms of the only woman I’ve ever felt whole with.

This is not how I imagined our reunion.

I guess seeing Lily was the final straw. Seeing my father get shot to death by my bride-to-be and learning about his true nature and what he did to Tyler has taken a toll on my soul. I haven’t felt like myself in such a long time. But, as of now, I feel like I’m no longer struggling to breathe. Being with Lily is like a lung full of fresh air.

I can breathe again.

And it feels incredible.

“I’m just so happy to see you. God. I’ve missed you like crazy, Lily.”

Her thumbs brush repeatedly over my cheeks. She cups my jaw, briefly shutting her eyes and presses her face to the side of mine. “Max, I’ve missed you, too.” She pulls back too fast and stares up at me. “But you should’ve called. How did you find me?”

I shake my head, wiping at my eyes with the sleeves of my suit jacket, feeling less manly and more pathetic. “You would have run from me if I let you know I was in the UK. I had to just come. I needed to see you. Tie helped me track you down. I’m not sorry that I found you, Lily.”

A little boy in a navy Batman T-shirt and cargo pants clings to Lily’s dress and tugs, his tiny fingers clutching the yellow fabric. “Mommy, who is this man? Why is he crying?”

She has a child?

She makes a face. Lily looks anxious. “It’s okay. He’s sad, baby, but he’s going to get better. Go finish playing.”

“But, Mommy—”

“Maxwell, go,” she orders sternly.

“Maxwell?” I ask, taking a closer look at the little boy. He seems about three years old with black thick curls that spring off his head. But it’s his eyes that lay rest to any doubt in my mind. His eyes are large and lavender in color. They’re just like mine. His eyes are exactly like mine. There are no ifs or ands about it. This is my son.

Red flags go off.

I know why she ran.

“This is my son, Lily,” I say, feeling faint.

She opens her mouth and shuts it again.

Maxwell’s brows furrow but he smiles up at me.

“This my Daddy, Mommy?”

Lily glances down and cuddles him closer to her hip as if I would snatch him from her this instant. “Yes, baby. This is your Daddy.”

I bend on a knee and look him in his bright young eyes. “Hey, little man. It’s nice to meet you.” My heart hurts and I almost fall backwards when he runs into me, slinging his arms around my neck.

“I have a Daddy,” he whispers happily.

“I have son,” I murmur through more tears.

\*\*\*

We eat fish and chips in a restaurant nearby. Maxwell sits in a booth between us, eating macaroni and cheese. He has his little hand clasped in mine. Maybe he thinks I might up and leave and vanish. I could not leave him now if I wanted.

I’m not really surprised at how quickly we are taken with each other. I wasn’t a father twenty-four hours ago, but someone would never have known by our interaction with each other.

“Mommy, want some mac ‘n’ cheese?” he asks, lifting his spoon up to her lips.

“Mm,” she says as he feeds her. “It’s good, baby. Now eat the rest.”

“But I have to ask Daddy if he wants some,” Maxwell mumbles. Then he turns to me after scooping up cheesy noodles. “Daddy, you want some mac ‘n’ cheese?”

“You bet, bud,” I reply, ruffling his thick hair. He smiles hugely and brings the spoon up to my mouth. I let my son spoon-feed me mac ‘n’ cheese. I don’t know



what it's going to take for Lily to agree to move back to the States, to Cherry Creek in particular. I need the both of them with me while I go through this process of proving Hunter guilty for the murder of Isabel. I can't abandon everything and move down here, even though I want to. "Bud, go help yourself to some ice cream." I need to have a moment alone with Lily.

"Can I have gummy bears and chocolate chips?" he asks.

"Absolutely. Add some brownie chunks for me."

"And can I have hot fudge?" He might be testing the waters with me, seeing how far he can push, but I am already a goner.

Signed.

Sealed.

Delivered.

He can have whatever he wants.

"Load it up, bud."

"Max, he can't have all that sugar. Maxwell will be bouncing on the ceilings," Lily chides, disapproving.

I reach out and touch her cheek, gazing into her eyes, realizing I have never not loved this woman. She blushes and looks away briefly before looking back at me. "Let Jr. have what he wants. Today is a special day."

She shudders and clears her throat. "Okay. But only for today."

I place my hand to the back of her neck, moving my thumb back and forth over her skin there as we watch him hold out a sprinkled-cover cone under the ice cream machine. A thick swirl of half chocolate and half strawberry pushes out.

“Three years you’ve kept him from me,” I say, urging her by her neck to lean in closer until my lips brush her ear. “We have to sit down and really talk about this. Just the two of us. I need you and Maxell in Cherry Creek ASAP.”

Her eyebrows furrow and I see the defiance and war there before it has even begun. “Max —”

My fingers clench on the back of her neck, pulling her even closer into me. My lips touching her right temple. She shuts her eyes and sucks in a sharp breath and shivers. “Don’t fight me on this, Lily. Please.” My voice has taken on a begging quality, but I don’t give a damn about my pride. I want my family with me. She has my son and not only that, but my heart as well. This woman owns me. She has my entire world in her palms. I stare into her eyes as if I can translate everything I’m feeling into her. She owes me this.

Her lips part, red blotches her cheeks. Her expression turns serious, her eyes determined.

She gives her head a sharp nod. “Okay. I’ll do it for Maxwell.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### *Eight Weeks Missing*

“They found blood in Isabel’s bathroom. They found a lot of blood,” Patterson says, scrubbing his tired face with his hand while looking over some documents. “Then there’s your T-shirt covered with more of Isabel’s blood.”

The coffee in my mug is now tasteless and churning in my stomach. “I didn’t kill her,” I say through gritted teeth. “She’s alive.”

He stares at me for a long moment and then closes his eyes, shaking his head. “You know, out of all my clients, you’re the only one I believe is innocent, Hunter.” He throws down the thick pile of papers on my kitchen table. They spread all over and I see how much evidence the prosecution has against me. “They have proof and footage of Isabel in your truck when you were parked in Max’s building’s lot—the day she went missing. I do believe that you didn’t harm Isabel...but others aren’t as sure. They don’t have a body and it’s hard to charge someone with murder without a body. So at least we have that. But you are the prime suspect in her disappearance for various reasons. Your motive is concrete and your alibi is nonexistent.”

“And the cellar?” I told him I kept her captive in my parents’ old wine cellar. He also knows the blood is from

when Isabel slit her wrist. All I did was clean her up and bandage her wounds. We're leaving the kidnapping part out on my behalf. I have yet to tell Patterson that Isabel may be using a forged passport and ID while traveling the world. As crooked as Patterson is, he does know what he's doing. He said he had people that got rid of anything connecting Isabel to me DNA wise. It makes me shudder with absolute terror to think he helped his clients who are guilty get rid of such things.

"Clean and spotless. Costly, but not even the best of CSI investigators can't find a hair follicle of Isabel's. Where exactly do you think Isabel is?"

Shrugging, I lean back in my chair. "I have no idea."

"This is very serious, Hunter. You could be indicted for murder, rape, and kidnapping. The people of this town have been itching to see a Knight get nailed with something. You have many enemies. This is just perfect. You know that, right?"

Yes. I do know. I know that Sally's older cousin, Steve Baker, is itching to see me rot behind bars for the lies Sally has spread like a disease. She's infected everyone.

"Isabel's alive. I didn't kill her," I keep repeating this. I'm repeating this for my own sanity...because it's starting to feel like I actually did murder her. The blood stained white T-shirt. The blood they found splattered all over the sink I cleaned up or tried to clean up. The pictures of her sleeping in the passenger side of my truck. Isabel's been haunting me since I freed her.

Mr. Patterson pours more steaming coffee into his black mug and sips at it. "We're going to get through this."

\*\*\*

Charlie and Caleb sit across from me on the white sofa in my living room. I slouch back in my armchair, glancing at the grandfather clock in the corner by the door. Hero and Naya are on their way over. They both had to endure long flights. I told them I didn't want them here while this madness is happening. But, as usual, they didn't listen to me. Caleb has chosen this time to explain himself yet again. Charlie had no idea about Blue or her mother, his child, Nastya. He did commit to stepping out of his marriage on a trip with his buddies in the late 70s with a woman he could hardly remember. Leave it up to Caleb to drag the skeletons out of the closet and make you have tea with them.

"I think you should at least meet her, Charlie," Caleb says.

"Yeah. Sure. I have child that I knew nothing about. But, hey. At least this old fart gets to meet his long lost daughter before he kicks it," Grandpa mutters.

"Charlie this is far from funny," Caleb admonishes.

"Actually, it is funny. It's fucking funny you would tell Ivy before you would tell Charlie or me. It's fucking hilarious."

"She needed to know, Hunter. I was afraid that—"

"That I would fuck my own cousin," I finish his sentence. "Well, thank Christ I didn't." With that said, I give him my most disgusted expression and stand, taking

two steps at a time. I stop half way up the stairs to find Ivy lingering in the corridor.

“Hunter—”

“Don’t,” I mutter, grabbing her elbow and hauling her to my room. “Don’t fucking talk.” I tear off the T-shirt on her back, unhook her bra, push down her sweat pants, and rip her panties into shreds. “All I need is your body right now.”

“It’s yours,” she whispers earnestly as I toss her face down on my bed.

I don’t bother to get completely undress. I shove down my pants and boxers, pulling my dick out. I wrap a hand around it and reach over to grab a condom from my bedside table. “I need you to fight me. I need you to struggle. Safe word if it gets too much. Understand?”

She glances back at me over her shoulder as I roll on the condom. Her eyes are wide and her expression is half-frighted and half-excited. She nervously licks her lips and nods. “Yes.”

“Good.” I stare at her for a brief moment, savoring her building terror and anticipation. Her pupils dilate and her chest begins to heave and swell. I suddenly reach out and grab her ankle. She grips the sheets and tries to kick me off. I ignore this and drag her down to me. She turns on her back and claws at my face. I let her nails mark me, my dick growing harder from the pain and her frantic state. I securely pin her down to the mattress by her neck. “Please. I don’t want this. Let me go.”

She’s adding dialogue.

Fine.

I’ll play along.

“You should have left when you had the chance, little whore. Now I’m going to fuck your pussy raw.”

She makes a pathetic whimpering sound, attempting to kick me off her. She’s strong. But I’m stronger. Gathering both of her wrists in one of my hands, I harshly press them above her head and lean down to stare into the depths of her brewing eyes as I grasp her chin. “If you keep this up, I’m going break your wrists. You’ll be in a lot more pain. So fucking lie back and accept this.”

“Please. Please. Let me go!”

I wedge my knee between her soft thighs and she clamps her legs close, trapping mine. I *tsk* and slap her tits until they turn a deep shade of rose and swell even more. Her flesh heats under my cruel palm.

Ivy tosses helplessly on the bed. I add pressure to her throat until I constrict her breathing. If I add a little more pressure, I’m sure I can crush her windpipes. She’s going to have bruised throat as well. Her eyes widen in alarm. Ivy feels my strength running through my veins like heavy steel. I can break her. She gasps for air, tears spilling over the sides of her face.

“Release my leg,” I say quietly.

She does and I release the tight grip around her neck without removing my hand completely. Ivy chokes on oxygen as she struggles to breathe. I take this moment and wrench her legs apart and thrust in her.

She’s fucking drenched.

“Take it out. It’s too big,” she rasps in her pained voice. “You’re hurting me.”

I smile down at her, running my finger down her silt to collect her wetness spilling out of her and then I smear

her glistening juices across her mouth. “This is what that is for, little whore. Ask me nicely and I might consider it.”

“Please take your monstrous cock out of me. It hurts,” she whispers softly, trying not to grin through her tears.

I pull back and watch myself glide half way out of her. “Okay. I’ll be good boy and take it out.” But I only pull out to ram back into her.

She groans and comes all at once.

Releasing her throat, I place my hands on her hips and begin fucking her with abandonment.

I’m done being nice.

I’m done being gentle.

I’m done playing games.

I thrust into her hard enough that her body lifts off the mattress. She gives me her flesh to devour completely. But it seems like my dick can’t go deep enough and my hands can’t seem to get a tighter grip on her hips.

Ivy’s groans and tearful pleas break through the cement blanket that envelops my brain, pulling me from my beastly brutality. “Are you okay, Hunter?”

“Fine,” I snap, shutting my eyes and finally coming.

I roll off her, landing on my back on the bed and then I knot the condom and toss in a trash bin in the corner. Ivy gives me an inscrutable glance. She has seen one of the many dark sides of me. My dark sides are cut into facets, and there’s no telling which unstable and erratic part of Hunter you’ll get once you ask for him.

Before I can offer an apology of some kind, she hops out of the bed and heads to the bathroom, closing



the door behind her. I release my pent-up breath when I hear the shower start. My eyes dart to my mobile that glows and vibrates on my dresser. I get up and stare at the name highlighted on my screen.

It's Chance.

What does he want?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age eighteen*

*Isabel age seventeen*

*We stand in the heavy rain on their porch before Tyler lets Hero and me in. Tyler beams at us. "You have pizza."*

*"And DVDs," Hero says, lifting the plastic bag full movies up. "You wanna watch dinosaurs eating people or zombies eating people?"*

*"Hmm. Dinosaurs eating people," Tyler says, taking the pizza boxes from me.*

*"Good. Jurassic Park is the shit," Hero adds, following him into the living room.*

*"Where's Isabel?" I ask, shrugging off my jacket and unlacing my wet boots.*

*"She's in her room," Tyler says, sitting next to Hero on the couch with a slice of pizza in his hands. "She doesn't leave her room much." He makes a face as if considering something. "She doesn't leave her room at all, actually."*

*"Shit," I mutter, scrubbing a hand down my face. It's been two weeks since her mother's death. While I didn't think she would miraculously move on and be happy with her life, I didn't think she would put it on pause either.*

*I grab a slice of cheese pizza and put it on a paper plate, glancing at Tyler. At least he looks like he's surviving. He seems okay. Tyler smiles a lot when he's around Hero. They seem to enclose their selves in a protective bubble when they're around each other that nothing else can penetrate. Just orbiting around one another seems to be enough for Hero and Tyler. I wish it were enough for Isabel and me.*

*Walking to the fridge, I grab a cold bottle of water and make my way to her room. I knock on the door twice. She doesn't answer, so I reach down and twist the knob, letting myself inside. She's curled in a small ball in her bed, wrapped in a ton of sheets. "I have food and water."*

*She continues to lie there unresponsive and unmoving. I set the pizza and water down on her nightstand and lift the sheets back to climb in bed with her. Isabel doesn't have any clothes on. She's only in her underwear and I feel myself harden immediately at the sight of her black bra and matching panties. I silently curse my dick for being so careless, but once I see her breasts and long legs, I can't help but get hard.*

*I physically move her to me, but she doesn't fight me. I lay her head on my chest as I encircle my arms around her, kissing the top of her head.*

*"It'll be alright, Isabel," I whisper in her ear.*

*She turns on her stomach in my embrace, so we're face-to-face. She stares into my eyes, and I can't place her expression because it's vacant and blank like those creepy porcelain dolls. "You're a shitty liar, Hunter."*

*I frown at her. "Don't talk like that."*

*“Why? Who cares if I curse? Who cares if I’m good or bad? Who cares if I lived or died? No one cares anymore. My parents are dead.”*

*I give her a squeeze and touch her cheek. “You’re wrong. I care.”*

*“You don’t care,” she replies in a flat tone that burns my ears. “You hate me.”*

*She sucks in a sharp breath when I tighten my grip around her. “I don’t hate you, Isabel. I never hated you. You know that.”*

*“I don’t know that. Why are you here? To torture me some more? You might as well put a bullet in my brain and be satisfied because I’m as good as dead already.”*

*I grit my teeth in frustration. Isabel is so far gone now. Maybe I’m too late. My only option is to scare her shitless, maybe then she’ll wake the hell up. I curl my fingers around her precious throat and begin to squeeze, cutting off her airflow. “You want to die? Fine. You don’t have to wait a moment longer.” I add more pressure and her glossy eyes widen. “I’ll kill you myself. You’re life is now my life. You don’t want it, so why should I? But ...if you fight, if you have any struggle left inside of you, I’ll let go. If you don’t, then I’ll continue to strangle you until you choke on your last breath.”*

*She makes horrible gagging noises, spluttering on saliva and trapped air, but she doesn’t fight, not in the way I want her to. She fights against her instincts to fight back. Isabel doesn’t do anything but hang limply while I hold her by the throat.*

*Her glistening tears fall from her eyes and roll down her cheeks, dripping from her chin. I drag her closer by*

*her neck and begin to lick at the wet salty trails on her face. "I know you want to live. I can taste it in your tears." I close my fingers tighter around her throat, feeling her pulse jump wildly and erratically under my fingertips and her vocal cords constrict.*

*I'm angry with her.*

*I'm angry with myself.*

*I'm angry that I can't be with the girl that I loved since I was seven and saw her swinging on the tire swing under the willow tree. "Fight me." My voice is hoarse and raw and sadden with pain I wish wasn't there.*

*Fight me she does.*

*Her nails claw at my firm hand. I instantly release her.*

*Isabel gives me an accusing glare as she clutches her throat with both hands. "You were going to kill me."*

*I shrug, flexing my wounded fist. She scratched the skin right off my hand. "Maybe." Standing, I fling the paper plate on the bed and then the bottled water. "You won't ever have a chance to destroy yourself. I'm going to tear you apart first before you can. I'm going to live to break you down, Isabel. Now eat you fucking pizza and drink you water."*

*She obeys, twisting the cap off the bottle and chugging the water. Isabel squeezes the empty bottle, crushing the plastic in her hand. She looks up at me with huge green-brown eyes that say so much.*

*"I guess you want me to leave," I say, walking towards her room door, feeling like I've lost my only love in this world.*

*"Stay and hold me."*

*I halt in my tracks and take a deep breath. My heart is thundering so loud that I'm sure she can hear it.*

*"What?" My voice is a whisper and nothing more.*

*She's reluctant to repeat herself, but she does. "Stay and hold me for a little while. Please."*

*My head bows and I shut my eyes. I heard her the first time. I just needed to hear her say it again.*

*I open my eyes and turn to face her, but with every step I take towards Isabel, I feel myself shedding into this new shady and sinister Hunter. But the absolute scariest part is, I don't mind being him, not if it's going to keep Isabel around.*

*She lies back against my chest and I hold her close, as if she might change her mind and run from me. "It's too late. You can't run from me. Ever Isabel."*

*I didn't know that I spoken the words out loud until she speaks. "I'm not going anywhere, Hunter. You have me."*

*My arms give her a little squeeze and we both settle into one another like we've done many times before. She falls asleep on me. Before I give into sleep, I whisper in her ear. "Yeah. I do have you. Never forget that, Isabel."*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### *Outing*

Chance stirs his fruit punch in his glass with his straw. He wanted to meet at Roxy's Diner. So I'm here. We're at a table in the far back where no one can hear us. But that doesn't stop people's curious glances and low murmurs as they all look my way. I see their unvoiced question in their eyes.

Why?

Why did he do it?

Why did he murder her?

"I saw her," he says almost too low to hear.

I drag my eyes from the groups of people that seem eager to grab their pitchforks and torches, ready to burn me for any indication of my true nature. They all feel it. They all know it. There's a monster amongst the crowd... a dragon of sorts.

Can they smell it on me?

"Seen who?"

His brown eyes stay on mine as he sips at his drink. "Her."

The way he stares into my eyes I know he's referring to Isabel. "When?"

“When you had Her.”

I hold his steady gaze a moment longer, and I know he’s not bullshitting. “Is that so?”

He nods. “She’s alive.” He keeps his voice extremely soft and leaves out Isabel’s name. I imagine it’s so no one can detect it, or record our conversation and use it against us.

“How do you know?” I mumble into my glass of grape juice, speaking as low as he is.

“Simple: You wouldn’t harm Her. You love Her.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?” I ask, unsure of his motive for helping me. Is Sally part of this?

Chance gives his head a slight shake and pulls at his leather jacket. “No. I’m here to warn you. Sally’s plotting.”

“She’s always plotting.”

He gives his head another shake. “No. It’s far worse. She’s using her cousin, Detective Steve, to put you under this time. Both detectives came by and they took her statement.” He pauses and holds my eyes. “It was on hell of a statement.”

“She has no proof of anything,” I counter.

“You being you and Sally being Sally, do you really think she needs proof? She has everyone wrapped around her manipulative fingers.”

“Except for you. Why are you helping me?” I ask, warily of his intentions. “You’re Sally’s muse. She holds you above everyone else and you betray her so easily? What am I missing?”

“You’re missing the part where I told you I saw Her. I talked to Her, and She changed the way I see everything. I looked in the mirror and hated what I saw



that stared back at me. I don't know if you have ever experienced self-hate, but it's powerful enough to make you want to change what you are, to rise above whatever lows you're in. That's what She did for me."

My brows lift in surprise, but I completely understand where he's coming from. "How many times did you talk to Her?"

"Once. But it was enough. I didn't report it back. I didn't want Sally to know where She was. There's something you should know, though. It might change the way you look at Sally. You may even hate her less."

I laugh and crunch on some ice cubes from my drink. "I highly doubt that."

"Lend me your ears. That's all I ask," he murmurs firmly.

Taking in his solemn expression, I nod, releasing a sigh. "Okay. Shoot."

"The pregnancies...she didn't abort them. She miscarried. Three times."

It's liked I've been kicked in my chest by a horse. I have to swallow a few times because I can no longer find my voice. "What?"

"I was there when all three happened. She called me. We were nothing more than friends then. She blamed herself and cursed you for some reason. Sally wanted you to be hurt like she was, I guess. I don't know why she detests you so much."

I stare at the three platinum rings on my left thumb and they get blurry. "She didn't abort my babies?"

"No. She just has this twisted view of reality. We all have a twisted view of perception, really. She isn't as heartless as you believe."

A bubble of elation and relief erupts in my chest. I close my eyes for a moment, the weight of the world lifting from shoulders. I don't know whether to laugh or cry first. "She didn't abort my babies."

"Hunter," Chance cautions in an alert tone. "Max just walked in, and I think he has a...son."

My eyes snap open at that to see Max and Lily and a young kid that clings onto both of them. They are seated in a booth near the front of the diner. When did Lily get back in town? She looks good with her hair tied up in a high knot and a violet sundress that matches Max and the kid's eyes. Max hooks a hand around her neck and pulls her in close to kiss her forehead. He whispers something in her ear and she laughs earnestly, leaning more into his side. The boy points at the shake flyers, indicating which one he wants. They both nod. Max rises and strolls to the bathrooms.

"Be right back," I say to Chance. I walk over to Lily's table and smile at her and her son. "When did you get back?"

Her eyes expand and she jumps from the booth, throwing her arms around my neck. "Hunter Knight. It's been forever." She holds me at arm's length and smiles hugely at me. "My God look at you. Wow. You're so handsome. It's ridiculous."

"No. Look at you. You're beautiful...and a mother?"

She flushes and nods, glancing at her son. "This is Maxwell. Maxwell this is Mommy's high school friend, Hunter Knight."

He makes a face. "Are you a real knight?"

I make the same face and he laughs. “Not really. Can you keep a secret?”

He nods vigorously.

“I don’t know,” I tease, playfully.

“I can. Tell me.”

“I’m not a knight. I’m a dragon.”

He gasps, his eyes growing wider. “Cool. Can you breathe fire and do you have wings? Are they big?”

“I breathe fire that’s hotter than lava and my wings are enormous,” I say, expanding my arms out to my sides to emphasize how huge they are and his mouth drops open. “They’re so big they drag behind me when I walk.”

He seems stunned.

Lily giggles and hugs her son.

“Can I see you change into a dragon?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t transform until my princess needs me.”

His curly head slants to the side, a curious expression on his face. “Where’s your princess?”

I feel that familiar pinch in my heart again. “She’s missing.”

“Where is—”

“That’s enough,” Lily chides, smiling down at him and stroking his hair. “Go finish your milkshake, Maxwell.”

“OK, Mommy.”

We watch him as he spoons the whipped cream from his strawberry milkshake and then she looks back at me. “Hunter, I don’t know what’s going on...but I know you didn’t murder Isabel. I always thought you

two would have a family of your own by this time. Everyone knows you guys are meant to be.”

That pinch in my chest intensifies. I take a deep breath but it does nothing to help the insufferable pain. “Thanks, Lily. She’s missing, but I have a strong feeling she’ll come back. We just have to be patient.”

“Hunter,” Max greets snappily. He gives me a hard look and sweeps Lily’s body behind his with a push of his hand, completely shielding her from me. It’s a protective move and one I have respect for.

“Max,” Lily says, trying to side step him, but he doesn’t allow it.

“No, Lily,” he says in voice that demands absolute obedience. “Sit back down with Maxwell.” She gives me a sympathetic look and does as he says.

“I didn’t mean any harm, Max. I just wanted to drop by and say hello. Congratulations on fatherhood. We should all be so lucky.”

His expression is severe but he smiles and it does not reach his harden eyes. “Let me walk you to your truck, Hunter.”

I glance back at our table and it’s already cleaned off. Chance is gone like he was never there, the tab paid. “Sure.”

We walk to the parking lot side by side and only when we’re outside does Max begin to talk. “What did you do to Isabel, Hunter?”

Taking out my keys, I sigh disappointedly. “I didn’t do anything, Max. She left. That’s all. She’ll come back whenever she wants. As hurtful as it is, Isabel left us both, Max. You should accept that.”

His jaw muscles tighten and he seems like he wants to bash my head in right now. “What did you do with her body, Hunter?”

“When we were together, everything you could imagine.”

His fists ball, ready to strike and I can’t be happier. I need a fight to shed this frustration I can’t get rid of. If Max throws the first punch, then it won’t look so bad if I retaliate.

“Max,” Lily whispers.

He glances back at her, the tension instantly leeching from his tense body. It’s amazing how love can do that and make you feel alright when the world around you is up in flames and at war. “Yes, babe?”

“Maxwell wants you back inside, and so do I. Come on, honey.”

He smiles at her, his eyes shimmering with a wide variety of things I once felt. “Okay, give me a minute, then I’m yours.”

I unlock my door and glide into the driver’s seat. By the time Max turns back around to face me, I have my truck cranked and ready to go. “I didn’t do anything to Isabel, Max. I love her. I want the best for her. That’s that.”

He studies me for long moment and shakes his head, scowling at me. “If she’s hurt, Hunter, I’m going to make you pay like never before.”

I grit my teeth and nod, but in the back of my mind, I’m glad Max cares about Isabel almost as much as I do. “Get back to your son and Lily.”

Max gives me another hard look before walking away.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE**

### *Family is Everything & Sally's Business*

Everyone is here and cramped in my house while the press and photographers are gathered around the fence that blocks me from the outside world. The reporters and their news vans are causing me high levels of anxiety. They're all eagerly waiting to break the same story. I sense them all staring at my house of glass with their hard stones in hand, ready to shatter my entire universe.

What will happen then?

What will happen once I break?

I shake it off and glance around my home.

Charlie reads children books to Jackson, the kid from the oncology ward I met a few years back, and his sister Jessie. I've grown extremely close to them over the years and they spend at least one weekend with me out of every couple of months. This is their weekend and they both wanted to come no matter what predicament I am in. Their mother agreed and wouldn't have it any other way.

So how could I say no?

Naya and Taylor are talking and giggling in the living room while Lark and Rex play pool with Ivy and Blue in the connected area off to the side. Everyone

seems to be getting along for once. But I have yet to talk with Blue since we found out we are blood related.

*Ding!*

The timer goes off, and I take the hot chocolate chip cookies out the oven, placing them on a cooling rack. Hero snatches one from the pan, burning his fingers and tongue as he hurriedly shoves it into his mouth.

“Shit, that’s hot,” he mutters, fanning his scorched hand in the air and chewing with his mouth wide-open, trying to cool the burning cookie on his tongue.

“Let the cookies cool first, idiot,” I say, thumping him against the head.

He scowls at me, rubbing the spot where I hit him. “Grandpa, Hunter hit me in the head and he called me an idiot.”

“Hit him again, Hunter,” Charlie calls out.

I do and Charlie laughs with everyone else.

“Snitches get stitches, boy. No one likes a telltale.”

Jackson gives him a high-five and smiles. “Right on, Grandpa!”

Jessie stands and walks over the piano. She runs her fingers across the keys, then sits down on the bench. I pause and watch them. They’ve grown so much. They’re practically little adults. Jessie begins to play the piece we’ve been working on for a while: Erike Satie Gymnopédie No. 1.

I shut my eyes and let my heart feel with joy.

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I tuck them both into the bed in my spare guestroom, which the both disagree with. Both of them rather spend the hours of the late night up and about. But I rather have them tucked safely away from the mess surrounding me.

Jessie defiantly folds her arms across her chest and pouts. “This is so unfair, Hunter. I’m fourteen now and I have the right to stay up pass ten.”

“No, Jessie. It *is* bedtime,” I say, pushing through her guilt trip that’s working effectively. “Listen to me now. Hunter knows best.”

“Just go to sleep, Jessie,” Jackson mutters. “You’re always peed off. Mom says it’s because your body is changing and you’re going through p—”

“You better not say another word, Jackson,” his sister snaps.

I clasp her hand in both of mine and stare into her pretty hazel eyes that instantly widen. “Everything you’re feeling is normal, Jessie. All the emotions and hormones may feel like a raging war inside yourself but the dust will settle soon and you’ll gain control over your body once again. Everyone goes through it. Boys and girls alike.”

“Gross,” Jackson shrills, poking his tongue out of his mouth. “I want to stay seven forever.”

I reach out to ruffle his head full of thick chocolate-colored curls, thankful that he is in remission. No cancer at all in his young body that’s filled with so much life. “All foolish boys grow up to be responsible men, Jackson.”

He wrinkles his nose and I laugh.



“Can you tell us how you met, Isabel? And how did you know she was The One?” Jessie asks. “I hope I find my boyfriend now, so we can grow together and learn each other really well. If I find him now then nothing will ever tear us apart from each other, like you and Isabel. You guys are Cherry Creek royalty.”

I gaze at her and her precious face flushes, her fluttering dark lashes going a mile a minute. I have to watch out for this little one here. She’s going to be a knockout and I already have a uneasy feeling rooted in my gut about keeping boys with bad intentions away from sweet Jessie. “I’ll tell you how I met Isabel and how I knew she was the one, but in return, I want you to promise me that you’ll both go to sleep after. Okay?”

“Promise,” they both say in chorus.

I settle in the chair and close my eyes. “Once upon a time, a lonely dragon stumbled upon a beautiful princess swinging under a willow tree...”

Once the kids are sleep, I grab a chilled bottle of water from the fridge and then step out on the deck outside, leaving my family to finish dinner around my kitchen table without me. The TV happened to be on and I caught a glimpse of the latest new story. It was about me and Isabel and the investigation that surrounds me. When I saw her photo that the news stations are streaming from her nursing graduation, my stomach twisted and I lost what little appetite I had. Isabel radiated purity in her all white cap and gown, smiling from ear to ear, and holding her nursing degree proudly in her hands. She looked like a goddess, pure and untouched from the sorrows of the world. She looked

happy. Isabel seemed content. But that is so far from the woman I left on a sandy shore...

“Hunter.”

I glance back and Blue comes through the door to join me on the deck. She pulls out a packet of cigarettes, plucks one out, placing it between her lips and lights it. She takes a hard pull and blows out a small cloud of smoke from her nose. “Too many people inside?”

“No. Too many news stories,” I explain.

Her nose and mouth scrunches as she makes a face. “No one is a fan of the media. They’re all worthless swine waiting on the next big thing to break. Greedy pricks. I do not blame you. You shouldn’t fear them.”

“I don’t fear them. I fear how the media may influence the people I care about. Jessie and Jackson and Hero and Naya are all innocents, and I don’t want what’s happening around me to cause chaos in their lives. They’re still so young.”

Blue takes another long drag, rolling her lit cigarette between her clever fingers as she contemplates something. “I understand. When the swine uncover we’re related,” she lifts a thin brow and smashes the burning cherry of her cigarette against the wooden beam on the deck, “they’re going to be all over that shit like vultures. Be prepared, big cousin. The onion-skin thin sensitive ones never make it out the limelight alive or sane.”

“I have elephant skin,” I mutter, staring at the full moon high in the dark sky. “Thick.”

She looks at me and then glances back at the commotion in the house. “Good. You’re going to need it.”

I follow her gaze to Detective Steve and Detective Amber joyously walking through my house towards us with the biggest megawatt smiles I've seen in a long while. It's like they're in a fucking parade, all they're missing is the cruisers and the high hand waves. The two somber officers behind them don't look as pleased as they are.

I close my eyes and all I see is Isabel.

Her face.

Her smile.

Her eyes.

Shit.

Fuck my life.

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The integration room irritates me. I feel trapped, confined, and helpless. I feel exactly how they want me to. Turning my head, I lift my eyes to the wide mirror across from me, wondering who's behind it watching. Patterson is on the plane now. He's flying in from Phoenix. What kind of business he has in Phoenix, I have no fucking clue. They picked the perfect time to fuck with me. Patterson won't be here for a while. They have hours to harass me and try to break me into saying some bullshit that will get my life thrown and locked in federal prison.

A clear evidence plastic bag that contains my blood-stained T-shirt is slammed on the table right in front of my face. "Where's her body, Hunter?" Steve snarls.

Amber gives me a sympathized look. But I see straight through their good cop/bad cop strategy. “Hunter, you can confess right here and we have a plea deal already prepared for you. It’s a great deal. I promise you. We don’t want to make this more difficult than it needs to be.”

A hysterical laugh bubbles out of me and I don’t try to conceal it. I said Amber’s very last sentence to Isabel countless times.

*We don’t want to make this more difficult than it needs to be.*

*Don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be, Isabel.*

They both look at me and then at each other, confirming something in their locked gaze.

“I’ve done nothing,” I say, feeling like my life is set on replay. “Isabel is alive.”

Her face saddens. “We have proof you took Isabel, Hunter.”

My brows furrow as my forehead creases. “What proof could you actually have?”

Steve flings a thick maroon folder on the table and pictures of Isabel and me escape the thick file, splattering all over the surface of the table like a slap in the face. There are frames of me and Isabel leaving her house. Frames of me and Isabel smiling at each other in my truck. Frames of me and Isabel going into my childhood home. Pictures of Isabel in her blonde short wig and me emerging from my adolescent home and leaving to get into a cab. Then there’s a frame of me coming back by myself. How casual we look, but I know

we were anything but casual. As soon as the sweat breaks across my forehead, I know that I am fucked.

“Sally hired a private investigator to look after you and we now know that you indeed were with Isabel,” Detective Amber says softly.

Detective Steve’s jaw tightens as he leans forward and braces his hands on the edge of the table as if to keep himself from punching me. He moves the photo of me and Isabel leaving together in front of my face. Isabel fills my vision. That is the last photo of us together. The last photo of Isabel. “The question is: What did you do with her?”

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They’ve set me up in another empty room because I refuse to talk. I have no sense of time because there are no clocks anywhere. Or windows. I’m left cuffed to a table with a paper cup of lukewarm water in front of me. My sanity feels as thin as this Dixie cup.

Though, I haven’t confessed to anything, I know I am truly fucked and only biding me time. My status is confirmed when an officer opens the door and Sally crosses the threshold, wearing a sophisticated white cocktail dress and matching heels. She flings her honey blonde hair off her shoulder with her shimmering eyes aimed at me and her red lips are parted in a bright smile like we are casually meeting for coffee.

She sits perched on a blue folded chair in front of me. I get a whiff of her rich perfume and I suddenly feel

like my head is under water. I suddenly feel like I'm being smothered, like I'm being buried alive.

I hate this feeling of being overwhelmed by her.

Not only does she get under my skin, she gets into my bones and leeches me dry of life.

Sally's thin golden brows furrow as she frowns at me. She reaches out to touch my hand. I shut my eyes once skin-to-skin contact is made.

I'm not filled with anger.

Or fury.

No.

I'm filled with sadness and misery and sorrow. I'm filled with grief so deep it seems bottomless. So when she touches me as if she has the right to, I want to crawl out of my skin and die in a dark corner away from prying eyes.

"Hunter, you look exhausted." She gives my hand a compassionate squeeze, but it's just as phony as the sandy streaks of her highlighted hair. "But don't worry. It's almost over, honey."

My eyes shift from her hand on top of mine to her malevolent gaze. She steadily holds my gaze like I knew she would. Her eyes aren't blue. Thank Christ. Sally has eyes the color of dark chocolate. I don't think I could have survived her if they were blue. She would really just be a copy of my mother, only younger.

"What do you mean?"

She tightens her grip on me and I scream inside my head. "Just confess, Hunter. Please. I don't want you to suffer anymore."

She really means: I hope you die in here, Hunter. I don't want you to see the light of the sun anymore.

“Maybe you’re the one that should start confessing.”

The wrinkles between her eyebrows grow deeper as she strokes my hand. “Confess to what, sweetie?” Her voice is gentle yet patronizing.

Working my jaw, I stare at her and swallow the pain down inside of my chest when all I truly want to do is spit it back at her. My throat burns and constricts when I whisper for her ears only, “I know about the babies, Sally.”

Her dark eyes expand and she chokes on a cough. “What?”

“You didn’t have to lie, but you did to hurt me. Despite that, it’s not your fault.” I shrug and draw in a breath that does nothing to satisfy the ache in my blistering lungs. “Shit happens.”

She tries and fails to smooth her perplexed features from her face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

This time I squeeze her hand that has gone limp on top of mine. At a time in my life, long ago, I once cared for this woman. I won’t go so far as calling it love. What we did to each other is polar opposite of love. But I cared for her. I worried about her. I don’t anymore. I will never lose sleep over Sally ever again. She knows this and that hurts worse than her lies ever did. “You do, and I want you to know that I forgive you, Sally. I forgive you for everything and one more thing.” I grip her hand a little firmer. I’m about to give her the best advice Isabel gave me. For the first time when my gaze hits hers, I feel her wanting to look anyway but into my eyes. She stares back at me with glossy orbs, though. “You don’t have to be happy, Sally. Just be enough.”

She jerks her hand away from me and jumps from her seat. “Get me out of here,” she yells to the guard outside of the door.

And just like that, I watch the old leave my life and new come in.

Sally exits and Isabel enters.

Sally is just as shocked as I am, watching open-mouthed as Isabel calmly walks pass her to my side and leans forward to press a soft kiss on my parted lips. I shut my stinging eyes and choke on her sweetness. I feel like crying for a completely different reason now.

“Let’s go home,” she whispers in my ear.

I nod in agreement, not fully trusting my voice to respond.

Once I’m un-cuffed, Isabel and I walk straight pass the detectives and out of the police department doors into a sea of swarming press. Isabel holds me close to her as harsh white light bulbs burst and explode, surrounding us in a halo of brilliancy. They snap their pictures. I squint at the never-ending wave of flickering lights that threatens to swallow us. Each click of the camera feels like they’re taking something private, something sacred, turning it into something that is less than it really is. Isabel reaches down and entwines her fingers with mine. She takes me by the hand and leads me into a sleek town car.

Lenses press against the darkly tinted window of the car and flash brightly.

I make a desperate noncommittal sound and Isabel pushes my head down into her lap. I don’t fight her. I go down willingly. I bury my face in the soft material of her



light blue flowing skirt. She shields me with her body like I've done for her.

She lovingly strokes my hair. "Shh. You're safe now, Hunter. Relax. They can't see us. Close your eyes. We're almost home."

The princess saves her dragon this time.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### *The Past*

*Hunter age eighteen*

*Grandpa Charlie pulls a small black velvet jewelry case from his pocket. I can tell it's something serious from the grave expression on his face. "This belonged to your grandmother, boy. I'm giving this to you because that's what she would want."*

*Nodding, I run my fingers over the soft velvet.*

*Charlie sips from his beer bottle. "Now don't runoff and get arrogant, giving it to any girl in a skirt. No. That won't do. You give that to the woman you'll die for. You hear me, boy?"*

*"I hear you, Grandpa."*

*"Good. Now let's go grab dinner while your bitch of mother is out. Don't wanna rattle a rattlesnake."*

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*My heart is pounding wildly in my chest and my breath is shallow as I walk up to Isabel's front door. I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.*

*"All I wanted to say is that I love you and I'm not afraid," I whisper, practicing on what I've wanted to say to Isabel for years, the black box of velvet burning red hot in pocket.*

*She can always say no.*

*Isabel probably doesn't love me anymore.*

*I've been a dick to her.*

*So harsh.*

*Cold.*

*And cruel.*

*She can say no.*

*But will she?*

*Squeezing my eyes shut, I ball my fist and knock on the door once. The door flies open and I quickly confess my one-liner, "All I wanted to say is that I love you and I'm not afraid."*

*"Well, that'll make things awkward," Tyler says through laughter.*

*I open my eyes and sigh heavily, smiling at him.*

*"Fuck. That will make things awkward."*

*"Isabel's gone to Roxie's to get takeout. You wanna come in and finish the last part of Titanic with me while we wait?"*

*"I got things to do," I say, wanting to take him up on his offer. "Don't tell her I came by. Okay, Tyler?"*

*"She'd want to know."*

*Shaking my head, I hold his sadden gaze. "Don't tell her anything."*

*He's silent for a moment and then he whispers,  
"You're killing her, Hunter."*

*My throat constricts and closes. "She's stronger  
than you know. Isabel will be fine."*

*"Without you?"*

*"Yeah," I say, regretting every word from my  
mouth. "Isabel will be fine without me. She has you."*

*"But I'm not you."*

*"Tyler, stop."*

*I know what he's doing.*

*It's working.*

*Guilt trips never fail on me.*

*"Talk to you later. Okay?"*

*He nods, glowering at me. "Later, Hunter."*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### *Bitter Sweet Reunion*

I watch in fascination as Isabel undresses me. Her hands are steady and precise. She isn't rushing nor is she moving with leisure. She pulls the soiled T-shirt off my head and flings it on her bathroom floor and then she shoves down my boxers and pants. I step out of them as she starts the shower.

“Get in and stay in for a while. Maybe it'll help to clear your head,” Isabel says, blushing slightly as her eyes remain on mine.

I do as she says, but when she turns to leave, I reach out and grab her arm. Her footsteps halt and she looks back at me. “Baby, don't leave me. I need you.” My voice is as fragile as I feel and unrecognizable. My voice is weak and as desperate as I am.

She steps forward and I haul her by her arm the rest of the way to me. She gasps when her back slams against the wall tile and the warm water hits her, wetting her blouse. Fisting a handful of dark fabric in the middle of her chest, I rip her shirt off her back and toss in the

corner of the shower. Her bra, skirt, and black lacy panties join her shirt.

My shaky hands reach for her and I cradle her precious face in my hands as if she might vanish altogether.

She looks deep within my eyes when she cautions, “Slow, Hunter. Take it slow.”

I shut my eyes and lean my forehead on hers, trying to catch my breath. That’s when I notice that my entire body is trembling. The feeling is like going through excruciating withdrawals with an armful of the origin of my addiction right here in front of me, tempting me to devour it all.

“I can’t,” I plea, spreading her legs wide and frantically thrusting into her. I choke on something building in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

Isabel kisses my quivering lips. “Shh. It’s okay. It will all be okay, Hunter. I’m with you, honey. Always.”

Shutting my eyes, I press my face in her neck and grip her hips hard in my hands, grinding into her. “I’m sorry. Please tell me you still love me.”

She remains silent and my heart painfully clenches. It’s about to erupt in my chest.

I reach down and pinch her clit between my fingers, thrusting deeper into her until she screws her eyes shut and tosses her head back. “Baby, please. Tell me you love me.” My teeth graze her breasts and nipples.

“Hunter,” she whimpers.

I pound into her harder and fill her with all of me. “Isabel, please. I need to hear it.”

Her dark lashes flutter open and she looks intently into my eyes while hooking her arms around my neck to

gain some balance. Her golden-green eyes sparkle and darken all at once. I lose all the breath I have ever owned. "I love you," she whispers against my lips. "I love you forever, Hunter," she says in my ear.

At her words I come so hard my legs wobble.

But I don't dare fall.

I hold her steady and continue to thrust inside of her, loving the feel of her silky, wet heat.

I can't seem to stop.

She tightens around me and climaxes.

"I love you, Hunter. So much," she says sweetly pressing kisses to my face.

"I love you, too."

She's gets shy on me when we break apart to wash each other. I frown when Isabel covers her breasts with her arms and turns her body towards the steaming spray. I don't know if she's actually conscious of this.

I decide to wash the parts she offers when she turns to expose her back to me. Picking up the shampoo bottle of the rack, I squeeze a swirl of fragrant gel into my palm and rub until I get a nice lather. Gathering a bunch of dark strands, I wash her mane of thick hair. She tosses her head back in my hands as I run my fingers through her hair from root to tip. I've always loved Isabel's hair. It's long and beautiful. I love her moans too. Wanting to hear more moans from her, I scrub and massage her scalp with gentle pressure.

A massive smile takes over my face.

I get what I want.

"Jesus, Hunter. What are you trying to do to me?" she says, facing me as she dunks her head in the spray. As the water cascades over her face and drips from her

plump lips. All I can think about is kissing her until she vows to stay with me for the rest of my life.

“I’m just trying to make you feel good,” I say, placing my hands on her hips and drawing her close to me so I can kiss those pink lips. “You came back to me.”

Her brows push together and I smooth the space between them like she has done to me countless times before. “I wasn’t going to.”

My fingers flex in her skin and she winces. “Why?” I ask, loosening my grip on her.

“You hurt me, Hunter,” Isabel confesses quietly. “You’ve hurt me so much throughout my lifetime, Hunter. You fucking killed me over and over again. But what you did was beyond hurt and beyond pain... you left me. Again.” She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “You left me. I waited like you told me to. I waited on my knees for hours and hours. Only when the housekeeper found me, did I realize you weren’t coming back.” She takes in a shuddering breath as tears roll down her cheeks. I wipe them away but they keep falling. She finds some kind of resolve and opens her watery eyes and they are determined. Isabel begins to repeat what I told her to do, and it fucking hurts just as much as did when I said. “I want you to take your IDs and passports into our room and lay them on the bed and then I want you to treat yourself to warm bath with lots of bubbles and oils. I want you to stay in there a good while. After that, I expect you to be kneeling at the door for me. I need you to follow these orders step by step. Fail to comply will result in severe punishment. Do you understand?”



“What do you want me to say, Isabel?” I ask, sliding my nose down her cheek and cupping her hot little pussy in my demanding hand. “You want me to confess how much of a fuck-up I am? How much I don’t deserve you?” She whimpers when I stroke down her slit and part her folds, dipping my middle finger inside her wetness. “How much I should leave you alone. How much I should let you go?” I press two fingers into her and swirl them in a motion that has her hips chasing my hand. My teeth close around her earlobe and I bite her there. “It’s not going to happen, sweet Isabel. You’re mine. And I’m going to make sure everyone knows it.”

She groans and comes on my hand.

Our shower is short. I carry her to the bed and a second later, I’m in inside of her again, holding her legs propped on my shoulders and thrusting slow and deep, as deep as I can go. I feel myself bend inside of her and she groans, her eyes rolling and her mouth slack and asking for my tongue. “You want it slow, baby. You’re going have it your way. I can fuck you for hours. Your pussy is mine.”

Her hand drops down to rub her clit and I pull out, flipping her on her back so I can spank her ass. “No. Bad girl. I didn’t tell you that you can touch yourself, did I?”

She makes a husky sound in the back of her throat.

My hand smacks across her incredible ass with my palm again, causing her skin to heat and turn deep rosy-red. “Answer me, baby.”

“No, Hunter.”

I grip the base of my cock and aim it at her entrance, running the head of it up and down her slippery slit.

She begins to pant and squirm.

My fingers bite into her hips, preventing her movement. “I’m going to go slow, Isabel. And you’re going to take every second of this, every inch of me, isn’t that right, baby?”

“Yes,” she says barely audible.

“You’re going to take it because you love me, right, Isabel?” I say, pressing slowly into her, filling her with everything I am. She clenches around me as I gradually sink into her inch by inch.

“Yes, Hunter. I love you,” she whispers, avidly pushing back against me.

“Good, baby. I love you too,” I say through gritted teeth when I’m fully rooted in her. She feels like heaven. Isabel is the closest to heaven that I will probably get. I pause and let her get used to me. I also take this moment to talk to her and explain where I am with her, where I want to be with her, and hope to God that we’ll be on the same page for once.

“But now I need you to listen to me, Isabel. What I did, baby, was fucked. I know it. You know it. I wanted to save you. I didn’t want you to suffer any more. I wanted you safe. But I’ve learned something.” My fingers trail down her spine and she shudders. “As much as I want all those things for you, and I desperately want them for you, you know how much so, I can’t save you. That isn’t up to me, Isabel. That’s up to you. You have to decide that for yourself. I’m here to pick up the pieces and make you whole again.” I throw an arm across her belly and hold her tight against me as I slide in and out of her, kissing her naked shoulders. “I want you, Isabel. I want you in every way imaginable. I want to be in your space. I want to be in your life. I want you to have all of

my babies. If you say yes, then I want you to have my last name. I want to fill you up when you get sad. I want you forever..." I shut my eyes when she clenches around my dick tighter than my fist ever could.

"Hunter," says breathlessly.

My arm tightens around her stomach. "Listen closely, baby. I love you. I want the best for you. I want you to fucking win at everything, Isabel. Everything. But if you want to win without me, you'll have to tell me now. I can deal. I'm not going to lie. It's going to fucking burn and hurt like hell, but I'll deal." My tongue touches the back of her left ear and she shivers as she grinds against me.

Yeah.

She likes that.

My girl fucking loves that.

"What's it going to be, baby?"

"I'm with you, Hunter."

"Always?" I ask, moving again.

"Always, Hunter. Baby, Always," she whispers, arching her back and completely giving herself to me. My heart fills with heavy glee whenever she calls me baby. She's too sweet to me, when all I've been is a dick to her.

I don't deserve her.

Or her forgiveness.

But if you know me as well as you think you do, then you know that's not going to stop me from being with her.

Or taking what she gives me.

Ever.

I ride her brutally and hard. She comes three more times. I lose my sight when I allow myself to come, seeing a sea of brilliant stars behind my closed eyelids.

We both collapse on the bed.

Isabel stares at the ceiling, breathless with a void expression.

I hook an arm around her waist and pull her into my side.

She takes big breath and then settles.

Shutting my eyes, I breathe in her lush scent and soak in her body heat as I stroke her back. "I don't know why you came back to me," I start, burying my mouth in her damp hair, "but since you did. I'm not going to let you go, Isabel. Never, baby. You hear me?"

"I hear you," she mumbles sleepily to my throat.

"My baby is tired," I say, cuddling her closer.

She reaches up, tracing my lips with curious fingers. "Yeah. Your baby is tired and jet-legged, but mostly tired."

"Sleep, then."

Isabel laughs softly, tips her head up and graces me with her shimmering eyes and smile that say so much, then she kisses the underside of my jaw, and wiggles her ass as she snuggles even more into me.

My pent-up breath escapes from my mouth.

She wiggled her ass on me.

Now I'm hard again.

My dick hurts and throbs painfully, but like I said before, if you know me as well as you think you do, then you know that doesn't keep me from spreading her thighs and pushing into her once more.

Her eyes fly open and she holds my gaze. "Hunter."

Pressing my forehead against hers, I grind my hips against her and stare into her eyes. “You wiggled your ass on me. I’m hard again. Didn’t want to waste it. I need to tire you out until you’re exhausted.” Her entire body trembles when my fingers brush her clit. She groans and I swallow it. “Shh,” I order against her quivering lips. “I have you. I’ll always have you, baby.”

When Isabel is peacefully asleep, I leave the bed and wander outside to her porch to make a phone call, staring up at the silver crest moon in the dark blue velvet sky. Two rings later, Ivy answers the phone.

“Hunter?”

“Ivy, I have to tell you, it’s over between me and you. Officially. This is a dick move, giving you the news like this over the phone, but I just can’t leave Isabel’s side anytime soon. I didn’t want you waiting and worrying when you’re free, Tinker. I’m not the kind of man that would drag you along, Ivy.”

“I get that, Hunter,” she says softly. “I also get that I was a good distraction at best. After what I kept from you, I don’t deserve any apology. So don’t feel too bad for me, okay?”

The moon disappears when I squeeze my eyes shut. Fuck me, she’s crying.

“Ivy,” I whisper firmly.

“No, Hunter. I’m okay,” she sniffs. “So don’t worry. Please don’t worry. I knew what you and I had, and it was temporary from the very beginning, nothing more than a short-lived fantasy. I enjoyed it for what it was worth, Hunter. You’re the most beautiful man that I have

ever had the pleasure to get to know. You're a superstar, honey."

That pinch in my heat begins and I swallow thickly. "Ivy."

"I'll have my stuff out within the day. She's The One. Be happy, Hunter."

She disconnects.

"You to, Tinker," I say to dead air.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### *Life with Isabel*

Soft sunbeams filter throughout the blinds, covering us in warm golden light. Isabel begins to stir in my arms. She constantly rubs her cheek across my chest, causing my heart to beat heavily. Her dark eyelashes flutter under my chin and tickle me there. I have to bite my bottom lip hard to stifle my laughter as I smile into her nest of black silkily hair.

My arm tightens around her and I give her forehead a kiss. “Morning, baby.”

She kisses my throat then whispers, “Morning.”

“You want breakfast?”

Isabel snuggles more into me. “Mm.”

“What are you in the mood for?”

She throws her arms around me and squeezes.

“Hunter Knight.”

“Isabel gets what she wants. Always.”

“Just hold me. Please.”

I envelop my arms around her and hold her so close to me it’s a miracle we aren’t fused into one.

We lie in bed tangled with sheets and each other, bathed in heavenly sunlight. I stroke her back, drawing shapes on her exposed skin with my fingertips. She

presses her face in my throat. I wonder what she's thinking.

"I love my Isabel," I whisper in her ear.

"I love my Hunter," she says through a lazy smile.

We settle into each other and gradually fall into sleep as if we never woke at all.

\*\*\*

The sky is dark and streaked with thick blue velvet clouds when we finally leave bed to eat Lucky Charms down by the stream. After watching ropes of silver water pass over smooth rocks, I look at Isabel as she takes spoonfuls of her marshmallows and gazes at the glittering stars. She seems at ease with me. We're surrounded by glowing flyer flies in the last August night. It's peaceful, and I hope it never changes between us once our bubble of safety pops. There are more people against us than for us. I hope to God Isabel knows how much I love her, because only love can cure and heal our relationship.

She fidgets with the digital camera around her neck.

I set my bowl down and flick her camera. "What's this?"

"Pictures."

"Pictures of what?"

Isabel scoops up another spoonful of marshmallows before answering, "Of the places I visited. I want you to see." She removes the camera from around her neck and presses a button to power it on. Vivid shots of Caribbean



blue seas with colorful coral and tropical fish fills the screen. The second shot is Isabel standing in front of the ancient pyramids. The next one is Isabel dressed in bulky winter gear surrounded by snowy mountains. There are also shots of the lavish hotels and resorts she stayed at. The last shot is Isabel dressed from head to toe in kaki like she's ready for an African safari ride. She's smiling down at a lion cub she swaddles in her arms in this shot.

"Did you have fun?" I ask from a constricted throat. She could have been enjoying herself along. But I took that from her when I held her captive.

She nods and leans her head against my shoulder as I flip through the pictures again. "I traveled the world, Hunter. There's still so much more to see."

"Isabel, do you truly forgive me?" I ask, abruptly changing the topic. My mind is racing with thoughts that make our happily after seem nothing more than a childish fairy tale, a fleeting chance of happiness that I want to hold onto forever. "I need to know."

She gazes into my eyes for long moment that has my breath coiled low in my stomach. "I know who you are, Hunter. I've known who you were most of my life. I accept who you are. So when you ask me if I forgive you, the answer is yes. I forgive you. I'll take the worst Hunter if that's all you have to offer. We've fought so hard for this, for you and me. And I don't want anything to ruin our future together. Whatever future that may be. I don't care what kind of future I have as long as it's with you."

I run my hand up and down her spine. "I promise to give you nothing but the best of me, Isabel."

We sincerely smile at one another, but I sense something in the wind.

It smells like tragedy.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*Hunter age twenty  
Isabel age nineteen*

*“You fucking touch her again, you fucking look in her direction again, I’ll fuck your sister after I fuck your girlfriend,” I warn. I shove him against the wall of red bricks. “You understand?”*

*“Yeah,” he answers, spitting out a mouth full of blood. “Fuck, Hunter. Is her pussy that good?”*

*My hand clutches his throat and I squeeze until his face turns pale and his eyes bug out of his skull that I will soon crack. “You won’t get to find out.”*

*I’ve been fighting asshole after asshole the whole year since college began. They all seem to flock to Isabel. I’ve been so fucking busy with them that I haven’t had time to just look at her.*

*I let the fucker go and go inside the library where Isabel is studying late by herself.*

*She has several textbooks spread in front of her and her face embedded in her notes. She doesn’t even know I’m here. But I’ve always been here, watching her, taking care of her.*

*I settle into a chair and stare at the only girl I've  
ever loved.*

## CHAPTER FORTY

### *Isabel's Welcome Home Party*

A month later...

Isabel and I have spent a month locked in her house, ignoring the demanding world around us like it doesn't exist at all. Our days were filled with breakfast in bed, long naps, and a lot of makeup sex. We made love and then we fucked until the connection between us is restored. We talked too. We talked about everything. We talked about us and we've come to an understanding of sorts. Isabel and I are in this together.

Whatever *this* may be.

I glance past the colorful streamers and balloons and come to realization that my house is once again filled with everyone in Cherry Creek. The young. The old. And everybody in-between. They're all here to celebrate Isabel. Isabel is surrounded by her protective shield Falcon, Harmony, and Victor. They all dance under the twinkling jars of flickering light. No one gets too close to her. I can give her distance knowing this.

I grab a cup full of ice and sit in the lawn chair and watch Isabel rub Harmony's pregnant belly as she says

something to her. She looks like she's due any day now. Harmony grins at whatever she says and nods, rubbing Isabel's stomach back. I narrow my eyes so I can read Harmony's lips better.

Surely Isabel wouldn't keep anything from me.

Or would she?

"Hunter still doesn't know," Harmony asks.

Isabel shakes her head and whispers something in her ear.

Harmony frowns at her, but embraces Isabel. "You need to tell him," her lips say.

I'm suddenly filled with nerves and anxiety as the unimaginable runs through my head.

\*\*\*

## Isabel

"Hunter still doesn't know?" Harmony says.

I give my head a slight shake and lean in close to whisper, "How the hell do I tell him I'm three months pregnant? He's going to freak out, Harmony. Hunter is in a good place and when he finds out that I've been keeping this pregnancy a secret he is going to flip. I can't do it right now."

She holds me tight against her. "You need to tell him."

"How?" I choke.

“Lovebird—”

Firm fingers curl around my elbow. “I need to speak to Isabel alone,” Hunter growls. He tugs me along until we’re inside of his house and up the spiral staircase and locked away inside of his room. My back is against the wall. He presses his muscular body into mine and his severe face fills my vision until it’s all I can see. One of his hands swiftly captures my jaw, the other travels under the hem of my loose shirt and his warm palm press flat against my belly, his fingers splaying over my navel, rubbing languid circles.

“You have my child inside of you, Isabel?”

I inhale sharply and burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, baby,” he murmurs, cradling my face and wiping my tears with the pads of his thumbs. “I’m going to take care of you and our child. You know this. I’m going to do the best I can to provide everything you all will ever need.”

A deep sadness resonates within my soul. “I lied.”

His golden brows push together as he looks into my eyes. “About what?”

“About last night. I do care about what kind of future I have. I don’t want whatever future you want. I don’t want to be a house wife. I want to experience life. I want to work.”

His expression is pained or maybe disappointed. His thumbs slide down my cheeks and gingerly stroke the sides of my neck. “You think I’m going to take that away from you.”

“You’re Hunter Knight,” I sniff, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. “You take what you want.”

I watch stunned when his full lips tip up in a grin. “I do take what I want, but I also want what’s best for you. As in, I want you to be more than enough Isabel. Enough is simply not good enough for you. So if you want to work, fine. You can work. You want to experience life, then that’s okay with me too. I want to experience everything with you, Isabel.” His heated hand under my shirt threatens to burn through my stomach. “I’m not going to cuff you to my bed for the rest of your life.”

“I mean,” I begin, “you are Hunter Knight.”

He laughs, blinding me with many white teeth. “I guess you have every right to doubt me. But I’m not going to do *that* ever again. You have my word, Isabel.”

“We can keep the cuffs in the bedroom, just not the part where I’m restricted to your house.”

“I understand you. Now give me a kiss, baby,” he says through a smile.

Leaning forward, I do as I’m told and softly press my lips against his supple ones. Hunter immediately takes over the kiss. His hand wraps around my neck. His lips are demanding and relentless over mine, nipping and sucking at mouth with eager persistence that leaves me breathless and dizzy. His hand leaves my tummy to rest on my hip, his fingers biting into my skin and when his sweet tongue touches mine, I lose everything but mind. My hands knot in his golden hair and I press closer into him until there’s no space between us.

“You’re all that I’m living for, Isabel. You’re all that I care about. I vow to never harm you again,”

Hunter whispers against my lips.

“What about hurting me? Are you going to hurt me?”



He lifts a brow and grins smugly. “My baby likes pain, so I promise to only hurt her when she wants to be hurt.”

I do nothing to cover my smile. “My Hunter knows me so well.”

“That he does.”

“I was pregnant when you left me on the beach. At first, I had no idea. I spent two weeks exploring the beach and caves. But on the third week, I couldn’t keep anything down. I felt sick and fatigue and tired all the time. Then I went to a clinic in Rio. The doctor there told me I was three weeks pregnant. I freaked out. I had no idea what to do, so I just tuned everything out and did the one thing I always wanted to do: travel.”

He dips his face lower and gazes into my watery eyes. “I’m so unbelievably sorry, Isabel. I would have never left if I knew.”

I swallow the pain, almost choking on it. “I get it. That’s okay. And I would’ve come back sooner if I knew how much of a mess you made for yourself. I saw a story about you and I in the airport when I was about to board a plane to Russia. I’m glad I didn’t go.”

“That makes the both of us.”

I wrap my arms around his back and bury my face in shirt, releasing a heavy sigh. “I let Falcon and Harmony and Vic know where I was. I didn’t think about telling you since...” I trail off at a loss for words.

“You’re here now, and that’s what counts.”

“We should get back to my party. It’s doesn’t look good if the honoree is absent from her own party.”

“Well, let’s get you back then.”

We hold hands and face the crowd together. We join Falcon and Harmony at a table on his deck. Hunter keeps me in his arms all night. He never leaves my side. But his body stills when Max and Lily make their way over to us. My belly is filled with butterflies, the beautiful kind of butterflies when I see Max and Lily together. They were destined to be together and you can never fight destiny. God knows I've tired and I still ended up tied to Hunter and pregnant with his child. I've learned to embrace destiny, because fighting it will only makes things so much worse.

When I attempt to stand, Hunter's arm curves around my abdomen and keeps me anchored to him. "Hunter," I whisper in a tone only he can hear, "don't be rude. Let me speak to him."

Hunter places his lips to the shell of my ear and I have no control over my body when I shiver in his arms. "You can talk to him all you like, but he doesn't get to touch you anymore, Isabel. And you certainly do not get to touch him. This is nonnegotiable."

I nod because they're approaching and I don't want to have any unnecessary drama with Hunter when this is supposed to be a celebration in my honor and we are making our grand debut as a couple.

"Max," I start, "it's so good to see you. You as well, Lily. You two look great together."

Max's lilac eyes shift to me with raw, unconcealed pain. He manages to smile through it. It's a tight and composed smile, but at least it's a smile and it seems genuine. "Isabel," he greets. "I've missed you."

I have to swallow past the thick lump in my throat. "I've missed you, too."

His dark brows rise to his forehead. "You have?"

"I have," I whisper.

"Good to know," Max says softly.

"You're glowing, Isabel. You look great," Lily says, timidly smoothing the invisible wrinkles down her flowy pastel pink skirt and tucking her wavy hair behind her ears.

Lily is so cute and sweet.

She's perfect for Max.

I love her already.

"Thanks. You look great, too. I'm so happy for the both of you and your son."

"Maybe we can meet for coffee sometime soon and I'll bring him so you can meet him," Lily says, her expression bright and her voice optimistic.

"Sure," I say. "I would love to meet little Max."

I watch as Max's expression softens and he wraps an arm around her Lily's waist, holding her close to his side like I've seen him do many times before. "I'm sure he can't wait to meet you."

"Look who's back!" Hero shouts joyously.

We all crane our necks to look at Hero who is dressed in a plain black T-shirt that shows off his athletic physique and dark snug jeans with black leather boots. He has a duffle bag tossed over his shoulder. Hero is absurdly handsome to the point that it's gag worthy. He looks like an editorial model. His beauty is alien yet very familiar to me.

Groups of people automatically part for him as he makes his way to us. They all gawk at Hero, their jaws barely hitting the ground.

Hero's sky-blue eyes land on me and I smile. Before I have time to blink, I'm tugged out of Hunter's arms with effort and pulled into Hero's. "Missed you, Isabel. Glad you're home."

Throwing my arms around his back, I hug him harder. "Missed you, too, Hero. You look amazing. You look healthy."

"You look good, too," he whispers into my ear, lifting me up until my feet are off the ground.

"Hero, let her go," Hunter warns quietly.

Hero sets me gently on my feet, lifting a brow at his brother. "Chill, Hunter. I'm not going to steal Isabel from you." Hero aims his radiant smile towards me and I lose what little breath I have. "Not that I would try again."

"I'd like to see you try to pull that shit again, baby brother," Hunter provokes. He's smiling but Hunter's smile isn't a friendly one.

It's a warning.

"Fuck off," Hero says through a grin. "Is that how you welcome me home? I know you've missed me."

They simultaneously embrace each other with quick and solid movements. My heart flutters with utter glee as I watch the affection pass between the two. It's obvious how much they love each other.

Naya joins us when she arrives. Her and Lark make the perfect rock 'n' roll couple in the history of rock 'n' roll couples. They both have this aura of mystery and allure that's intoxicating.

I close my eyes and lie back in the safety of Hunter's arms. I take a deep breath, enjoying this sense of warmth and family. The only people who are missing

are Rex and Taylor and my aunt Lily. Taylor sent me an email apologizing for their absence. Lily still doesn't like big crowds. But I do get to meet my aunt.

I'm meeting up with them later tonight when everything is over and silent.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### Hero

The party has died down some. Isabel is still gorgeous and she still has no fucking clue. I guess it's good for Hunter. I know my brother and he isn't going to let Isabel far from his sights now that she came back to him. They seem more bonded than ever. Inseparable even. Everyone thought Hunter killed Isabel. It's ironic that half the town's population is here, celebrating them. It's hilarious how things work out sometimes.

I sit on the edge of my bed and stare at the door, hoping Naya comes through. She looks as edible as cotton candy in a dark blue leather dress that hugs her figure too perfectly. Jesus. She takes my breath away every time I see her. How the hell can she get more beautiful over time? I love my sister. Swear to Christ I do, but I love her more as a lover than an actual little sister. The way we are with each other... is just more than a typical brother and sister relationship. We mean more to one another. Now I only have to convince her of that.

I send her a quick text.

**Me:** Come to my room.

**Naya:** No.

**Me:** Please. It's been forever since I've seen you.

**Naya:** Lark loves me. This is wrong.

**Me:** What about me? I love you, too. Am I of no concern anymore?

**Naya:** You're selfish.

**Me:** Only when it comes to you. Please come to my room. I need you right now.

I power my phone off because ten minutes pass and she doesn't text back. I double over and rest my elbows on my knees, running my fingers through my hair to squeeze it by the roots, the pain spikes throughout my scalp and ripples all over my body. God, it feels incredible.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I lie back on the bed and stare at the white ceiling. How the hell did my life end up like this? I already know the answer. But still. It's a fucking pathetic existence I'm living. I've been sober for all of five weeks and I'm more than ready to throw the squeaky clean lifestyle of sobriety away. Naya asked me to get sober, and I did it for her. I gave up the booze, the pills, the sex, everything for Naya.

And what do I get in return?

Fucking silence.

My eyelids squeeze shut with my mind wandering to my time in Paris. I met someone. It happened so suddenly and at a McDonald's of all places. They might not remember me at all. But when I met that person a bond was formed. I don't know what it means exactly...

I'm lying.

That's the thing you don't know about me.

I'm a liar.

I lie a lot.

I do know what it means.

It means I have to see them again.

And soon...

My room door creaks open and I crack open an eyelid. Naya dressed in her skin-tight dark blue dress comes through my door. She shuts it back and locks it. Lifting myself up, I sit up and watch her. Her deep black silky hair flows down her back and her bright green eyes has me in trance that I never want to weak up from.

I swallow thickly as she slowly walks towards me one step at a time. Naya's green eyes are blazing once she sets her sights on me. Her eyes transform into a dark shade that almost looks as black as her hair. I wonder if she has any idea how sexy she is.

My shaky hands go to her hips when she steps in-between my legs. I lean my head on her stomach and she runs her fingers through my hair. "Love me, Naya."

"We can't keep doing this, Hero." Her voice is as tired and as cheerless I feel.

She's right.

But I'm not interested in who is correct, who's right, and who's wrong.



The only thing I want right now is her and her body rubbing against mine.

“I need you, Naya.”

Her small hands touch my face, running along my cheeks and the seam of my lips. “I love you. I do this because I love you. This is our last time, Hero. I can’t...” she chokes on her tears. “We can’t keep this up. I love Lark and he loves me.” I hold her closer and press my face closer into her stomach.

Naya doesn’t allow me to hide this time. She grasps my chin, forcing me to look into her glassy eyes. “This is our last time, Hero. I mean that with everything I have. This is it.”

I nod and I know I should tell her to leave, tell her what a fuck-up I am for asking this of her, and how sorry I am for doing this to us and our relationship.

But I can’t.

I can’t because I’m selfish.

So I won’t.

She removes her hands from my face and holds my eyes captive as she takes off her dress, revealing icy blue lace panties and a matching bra.

My mouth waters, my dick hardening and painfully straining against my zipper. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to get past you, Naya. You have my heart.”

Naya screws her eyes shut and bows her head with a heady expression contorting her features. Taking in this brief moment, I devour her angelic sight. She’s too perfect for me. I know this. Her eyes open with a steely resolve. “Tell me what you need from me, Hero. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Tell me you love me some more,” I whisper, lifting her hand and placing it on my chest. “Touch me. Fucking love me. Do whatever you like. I’m yours. I need you to cure this loneliness. You’re the one keeping me alive.”

Naya takes off my shirt first, raining sweet kisses across my collarbone. Her attentive hands explore the plane of my chest, running along my sides. She unbuttons my jeans and pulls down my fly. Her fingers hook under the elastic waistband of my boxers and I lift my hips so she can pull down my pants and underwear. Naya wraps her firm fingers around me, slowly sinking down on my cock. A flare of intense desire surges down my spine, causing my breath to catch in my throat.

She looks deep into my eyes, sliding her nose down mine and I have to fight hard not to shudder. “I love you, Hero.”

“I love you more,” I whisper, kissing the corner of her generous mouth.

Naya pushes down on my shoulder and my back hits the pillow of the soft mattress. She interlocks her fingers with mine, moving her hips in an unhurried circular motion that has my body ablaze and my dick hard as stone.

“Fucking ride me, Naya,” I beg, lifting my hips off the bed, going deeper inside of her.

She gives her head a slight shake and with a heavy groan I drop back to the bed. “No. Not right now. I want to feel you, Hero.” Her hands squeeze mine as she slowly grinds down on top of me, closing her eyes and tossing her head back in pure pleasure. “I want to feel every inch of you. Every inch.”

My eyes turn into slits as I bite down on my bottom lip, trying not to bring it home early. She rides me slow and easy with all the leisure in universe. Naya's dark hair cascades over her breasts all the way down to her back like a river of midnight water.

My hands caress up and down the sides of her curves, marveling at how soft her golden skin feels under my palms. Then I glide my hand into the nape of her neck, fisting a handful of long hair and tugging it harshly to keep me rooted deep within her.

My free hand pinches her dusky nipples between my clenched fingers. I watch her sensitive skin pucker and I close my mouth around her nipple that tastes sweeter than honey and sugar combined. "Fuck me, Naya."

"Hero," she gasps with her entire body quivering.

"Let me feel you come, Naya," I order, feeling her internal muscles squeeze me to the point of pain.

She nods, riding me harder.

"Just like that, baby," I say, jerking my hips up for her.

"Sweetie," she whimpers as a rush of warm fluid trickles down between us.

She groans in protest when I withdraw myself. We switch positions and I lay her on her back and pause to kiss her tummy as I glide down her body. "I have to taste you, Naya."

"Hero," she says so low and softly I feel it in my dick when I wrap my hands under legs to spread her thighs that gleam with her arousal. Bending my head between her legs, I lap at her wetness there. My tongue slides through her folds. I close my eyes and moan into her. She's too fucking sweet. Naya's the nectar in life

that I was never supposed to have tasted. She's my sister. She's taboo. She's forbidden fruit. She's wasn't meant for me and yet I have my head shoved between her legs and my tongue deep in her pussy.

I love my sister.

I do.

But it's a tragedy that I love fucking her almost as much.

She moans thrusting on top of my mouth. Grinning, I dip my tongue inside her, licking up all the wet goodness she has for me, not wasting a drop. Her hips surge forward, her fingers curl in my hair and she comes again in my mouth.

"Naya, you're the only one that makes everything okay when it feels like the sky is falling down on me." I kiss her inner thighs. "I love you, Naya."

I lean back and straighten my pose, wrapping my hand around my cock and pushing into her again. My trembling arms brace on either sides of her as I hold myself up once I'm fully inside of her. "I love you so much, Naya. I would do anything to protect you, even if that means protecting you from me," I say hoarsely, pulling out and thrusting into her and hitting her cervix.

She makes a pained noise in the back of her throat, squeezing her eyes shut and tossing her head into the pillows.

"I love you so much that I can let you go, Naya. I can and I will for you." Reaching down, I fiercely rub her clit until she's breathless and frantic under me. Leaning forward, I press my lips to hers and collect her moans.

I'm barely holding on as it is, but I don't allow myself to come. No. Not yet. She has to enjoy this. She has to understand how much I love her, how much I will miss her, how much I wish things could stay the same between us.

I flip her on her tummy and part her legs, gingerly pushing into her. Naya begins to cry softly into the sheets as I move carefully inside of her. Her body shakes with silent sobs, her inner walls constricting around me. I swell inside of her, my dick pluses as it absorbs the trembling in her body that her tears cause. I thrust deeper into her, wanting it all for myself.

Pressing my chest into her back, I give her all my weight.

She whimpers but arches her hips back, meeting my slow strokes.

My hands move on top of hers, my fingers lacing through. "I'll take your tears, Naya. I'll take your pain. I'll take your body. I'll take your pleasure, because I want it all Naya." I withdraw and push into her harder, making her gasp and squeeze my fingers. "I want it all, baby. I want all of you."

She screams out when she comes again.

I don't give her time to catch her breath when I turn her over on her back and begin licking her with abandonment. My tongue lashes at her clit. My fingers plunge into her as far as they can. And I suck and bite everywhere my mouth lands.

"Am I good enough for you now, Naya?" I ask, when her hips buckle on top of my mouth.

She pushes my head away and manages to straddle me despite her trembling limbs. Naya carefully lowers

herself on me and I shut my eyes and groan out like a wounded bear in frustration. She feels better than any pill or drink that I have ever had. Warmth surges up the base of my spine and my balls tighten. I come instantly.

Naya places her hands on my chest, leaning down to kiss my lips. "I love you, Hero. You've always been good enough for me." She continues to ride me. My dick is sore and aching, but I will never tell her to stop. I need her like this now. This is our last time, we might as well fuck until we are both debilitated and too wrapped into each other to tell where I begin and she ends.

Hooking a hand around the back of her neck, I grip her there and pull her face towards mine so I can taste and bite her lips.

She takes in a sharp breath, losing it immediately when I thrust up into her.

My breath comes in fast spurts when her nails drag down my chest, clawing me and marking me with harsh red stinging welts.

Naya leans forward, licking at the trickle of scarlet from a welt where she broke skin. I kiss her lips and taste my metallic blood on them, wanting to make this high last longer, because anything is worth trying to gain more of Naya.

"Fuck," I whisper hoarsely, coming again.

Her legs tighten around me as she strokes my back, absorbing my orgasm shock waves.

We don't say anything more. It's just our hearts beating against one another.

And that's enough.

For now.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty*

*“Hunter Knight,” Sally purrs, wrapping her arms around me.*

*I swallow my disgust down and crawl inside myself when she touches me. She looks like a younger version of Grace, except she has dark eyes.*

*Dark eyes that never miss anything.*

*My eyes squeeze shut and I try my best to picture Isabel on top of me instead of Sally.*

*Isabel kissing me.*

*Isabel riding me.*

*Isabel calling out my name.*

*It works.*

*But only for a little bit.*

*I open my eyes when I come and then toss Sally off me. After all these years, I still sacrifice so much for Isabel.*

*So fucking much.*

*My entire life.*

*“Where are you going?” Sally questions, scowling at me as she touches my semen running down her thighs.*

*“Shower and then I’m going out.”*

*She has words for me before I leave out the room.*

*“If I see you with Isabel, I will be forced to tell Grace.”*

*Working my jaw, I leave and step into the bathroom  
to wash the reeking stench of Sally off my skin.*

*I don’t say anything.*

*I never say anything because that’s what Sally  
wants.*

*She craves my attention, even if it’s anger and  
hatred.*

*I rather give her nothing.*

*The water is on full blast and scalding hot. I scrub  
myself hard enough my skin threatens to break.*

*I fucking hate this.*



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### Isabel

Making a left, I pull into the brightly lit parking lot of Cherry Creek Hotel. It's where Naya and Rex told me Lily wanted to meet, which is fine with me. It doesn't matter where we meet, just as long as we meet. I need to see my aunt that I had no clue existed until three years ago.

I've been waiting for this for three years and I couldn't be more happier and nervous.

A large security-looking man with a severe face, wearing all black and dark shades greets me when I push through the double glass doors. "Miss Waters, please follow me."

Taking in a deep breath, I nod. He leads me past the golden plush and lavish furnishings and shimmering crystal chandeliers to the bank of polished elevators. We step in and he presses the top floor. The doors slide open and he escorts me through maze-like corridors. The halls are empty and bare, but vacuums are still plugged into sockets and housekeeping carts are scattered around as if someone ordered the staff to immediately stop what they were doing and disappear. It's strange that we haven't

encountered anyone past the receptionist desk. Where are all the guests?

He halts suddenly and I almost crash into him. He sticks the keycard through the slit above the latch and the door unlocks. He pushes the door open for me and I step in, my eyes landing on Lily dressed like an angel in a cream white-colored dress, tendrils of her wavy blond hair has escaped her bun at the nape of her neck and hang loose, around her face, framing it perfectly. It's difficult not to see her as my mom, because she looks exactly like her, right down to the thin arch of her eyebrows.

I swallow thickly and move straight to her, throwing my arms around her midsection and holding on tight.

"Isabel," she says softly, her voice sounding like my mom's. "I've missed you, sweetie."

The ache in my chest intensifies and I struggle with the heavy sob in my chest until I'm no longer struggling. My face is wet because I burst into tears. My fingers twist in her dress as I press to be closer to her.

"Aw, honey, calm down." Her hands lovingly stroke up and down my back and she gives me a firm squeeze. "Breathe, Isabel."

I suck back a breath, my head feeling dizzy. A strong hand curls around my elbow, gently pulling me from my auntie's embrace and powerful arms wrap around me, warm lips press into the shell of my ear. "Baby, calm down."

I press my face in Hunter's shirt, not surprised one bit he found me. He was asleep in bed when I left. But I should know by now that I can't keep anything from

Hunter Knight. Tilting head up, I stare into vivid ocean blue eyes that show deep concern. “She’s really here, Hunter.”

He gives me a pained smile, cradling my face with his hands on either side. His thumbs wipe away my tears. “Yes, baby. She’s here.”

“I have part of my family back.”

Hunter slightly nods, sliding one of his thumbs across my lips, smearing the wetness from tears on my quivering mouth. He slants his head and delicately touches his lips to mine as if he might break me if he used more pressure, his hand moving down my sides to rest gingerly on top of my stomach. “You have all of your family, Isabel, including my child growing in your belly. You have all of us now and I plan to keep it like that. I’m going to take care of you and our child, baby.”

My hearts stops and I instinctively lock my limbs around the man I know without a doubt in my mind I will spend the rest of my life with. “I love you, Hunter.”

His lips move from the corner of my mouth to the curve of my jaw up to my ear. “Love you more, Isabel. So much more.”

I press my face under his chin, taking a deep breath with every overwhelming emotion running through me.

His hand squeezes the back of my neck. “Go and get to know your aunt, Isabel.”

“Okay,” I whisper, giving him a squeeze back. With my eyes on his blue ones, I drop my arms from around him and take a step back when all I really want to do is pounce on him.

Aunt Lily gives me a gentle smile, placing her arm over my shoulder. She presses a kiss to the top of my

head, snuggling me in my arms. Lily leads me to a sleek white sofa and we sit next to each other. I'm vaguely concerned when Hunter exits out the suite doors and leaves us.

She holds my hands in hers, placing them in her lap. "I'm so incredibly happy to see you, honey. You're more beautiful than your pictures."

I suppress my sob so I can speak through my hoarseness in my sore throat. "I can believe you're finally here. Where's Taylor and Rex?"

"They're down in the kitchen—Rex's a chef now and a great cook. They agreed to give us a bit of privacy. I've wanted to come home since I had to leave everyone behind." Her expression saddens. The grief is thick and strong. I have to breathe deeply through my nose to not get smothered by it. "I didn't think things would escalate to being without my sister, Ivan and Tyler." She gives me a wavering smile as her vivid green eyes are hit with moisture. "But at least I still have you."

"Do you know why my mom and dad would...commit suicide? They loved us, so I don't understand why they would do something like that. It doesn't make since."

She grips my hand tight in hers, wiping at her eyes with her free one. "I don't understand, either. I'm afraid I will never understand."

"Would Blain Stewart have anything to do with it?"

Lily shakes her head. "Blain has been dead for twenty years. Isabelle and Ivan would have never allowed Blain to come between their family. I'm absolutely positive she didn't have anything to do with their deaths. I feel as if they had a bigger purpose, as if

they had to sacrifice themselves for a grander picture, for you, Isabel, and your brother. I can't think about it any other way."

Nodding, I breathe through the bubble of pain in my chest. "Something's missing. The reason *why* is missing."

Her elegant fingers tighten on mine. "We may never find out, Isabel."

My eyes are leaking in spite of my attempt of being strong. "I know."

She scoots closer, wrapping her arms around my quivering body and embracing me tightly. "We'll get through this together. I promise. Now tell me everything I've missed."

"I'm pregnant," I blurt out through a shaky whisper. "And I'm terrified."

## **PART IV**

# **RESURRECTION**

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

### *Old Pain & Labor Pains*

“Where are you taking me,” she says quietly, blanking staring out the window.

“It’s a surprise,” I say, smiling over at her. I park with the trees get narrower, the ground softer under the tires. “We’re here.”

Getting out the truck, I open Isabel’s door and help her to her feet. She’s been crying for most of the morning. Today is the anniversary of Tyler’s death. Today is a sad day. When she hurts, I hurt far worse.

Taking her hand, I lead her through the path in the woods that I’ve come to memorize. We stop when we come out of the pines into a clearing of wild rosebushes that sprawl down the length of the side of a river.

“This is my sacred place,” I say softly as if I don’t want to disturb the sleeping blue jays in the green lefty treetops. “I came here years ago and fell to my knees, asking God a favor. I kept coming here. All the time when Sally told me about the babies. I planted three rosebushes and they have thrived here.” I pick up the bundle of lavender flowers I’ve laid on the ground by the hole I dug an hour earlier. “We’re going to plant these for Tyler. You remember how much he loved the lavender that grew like crazy around your house?”

She nods weakly, wiping at her eyes. “He loved lavender.”

“Let’s make Tyler happy and plant them. Maybe they’ll grow in abundance like the roses.” We both kneel on the ground. She gathers the lavender flowers in her palms as she lowers them into the earth. I scoop up the rich soil and begin to pack the hole. “Talk to him, Isabel.”

“What if he can’t hear me?”

“He can,” I urge. “Tyler is in the stars and everywhere you are.”

She releases a shuddering breath, staring at the brilliant lavender. “I can still feel you here, Tyler. I still can’t believe your not here with me. I’ve been needing you. I miss you every hour of every day. All I dream is you.” Her tears drip on the lavender flowers like rain from the sky. “I didn’t think I could make it. But I know every time the sun’s warmth touches me, you’re by my side. I promise to make you proud, so proud you won’t have to worry about me. I promise I’ll be okay. You promised to never leave me. And you haven’t. You kept your promise. So I’ll promise I will be okay. Know that I’ll be okay, Tyler.”

I hold Isabel in my arms and cuddle her close to me as she sobs fiercely. “I promise to take care of her, Tyler. We’ll be all right.”

“I love you, Tyler,” she weeps hoarsely, her hands fisting in my shirt. “Missing you. Wish you were here now. I promise to be okay.” She takes a deep breath. “I promise I’ll be okay.”



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*Two days later...*

“Isabel, baby, wake up.”

She rolls away from me still asleep.

I drag her back towards me and caress her ass, kissing her ear. “Baby, wake up.”

“Mm.” She swats blindly at me and I pinch her nipple through her nightie. Her body jolts forward and she gasps, her eyelids blinking open real quick.

“Hunter.”

“You need to wake up. Harmony’s in labor. Falcon called you six times.”

She jumps from our bed suddenly, heading to our closet and shedding out of her white silk and lace nightie. “What? Oh my God, Hunter. What are you waiting for? Get dressed.”

I glance down at my T-shirt, jeans and boots and then smile to myself. “I’m already dressed, Isabel.”

“Good. That’ll save us some time. Falcon called six times? I didn’t hear a thing. I’m usually a light sleeper. But I’ve been sleeping like the dead since I’ve been back with you.”

My stomach twists in nauseous knots.

She’s been sleeping like the dead since she’s been back with me?

That means I gave her three years of not sleeping peacefully.

Three years of unrest I've given her and it's all my fault.

She comes back out in a mint green shirt paired with a black cardigan and jeans. Isabel stares at me as she reaches for an elastic band off the dresser to tie her hair in a messy knot on top of her head. Her face is free of makeup and drowsy with sleep, but she has never been more beautiful to me.

"Ready?" I ask.

She wrinkles her nose and then glances around. "Do you have some peppermint or maybe some gum. I don't think I have time to brush my teeth."

"There's gum in the truck," I say through a smile. Though Harmony's in labor, Isabel doesn't want to miss a thing.

"Okay. I'm ready then," she says, grabbing her camera.

\*\*\*

The entire west wing of Cherry Creek Hospital has been rented out by Falcon. How he managed to rent an entire wing of a busy small town hospital, I may never know. I lounge in cushiony chair in the waiting room, aimlessly flipping through a parenting magazine while Isabel and Harmony walk the hospital corridors to help with the labor pains.

Falcon flops down in the chair next to me, looking exhausted. He rubs his hand over his thick stubble and looks over at me.

“Scared?” I ask.

“Fuck yes,” he says instantly. “She’s having our baby. She’s about to give birth to our child. I’m fucking scared out of my mind. I don’t want to fuck up fatherhood. You get a one shot deal at fatherhood and I don’t want to tarnish that for my daughter.” He leans back, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip and his expression is far-off. “I want her to have the best.”

“She will.”

Falcon turns his face towards me, lifting a brow. “How do you know?”

Shrugging, I toss the magazine back on the table. “She has you, and you’re a responsible guy with good morals. You don’t have to be a math whiz to know the probability of your kid being a decent person is in your favor.” I glance at the TV. It’s a news story about Harmony and Falcon and Vic. “You’ll do fine.”

A moment passes before he whispers, “Never in a billion years would I have thought that you would give me good parenting advice and me actually taking it. Thanks, man.”

I look at him and nod.

“Are you scared?”

“No.”

His brows furrow, his expression skeptical. “You aren’t scared?”

“No, not as long as I have Isabel in my life,” I answer truthfully. “She’s my everything. When I’m with her I have nothing to fear because I have my world and my heart.”

“Damn, Hunt,” he mumbles through a grin. “You’re still crazy over her.”

“I’m absolutely mad over Isabel.”

“I know the feeling,” Falcon says, looking down at his wristwatch. “This makes hour five of labor work. We’re fucking lucky to be men with dicks.”

Snorting laughter, I close my eyes and lean my head back with thoughts of Isabel and our child.

\*\*\*

Victor arrives with takeout and we all crowd in Harmony’s room and eat. Harmony lies in bed, glaring at us. “I hate you all so much,” she mutters, throughout her breathing exercises. “Especially you, Falcon. You did this to me.”

“Aw. Don’t be mean, baby,” he replies, taking a chunk from his burger. “I’m hurting just as much. Watching you go through this isn’t easy.”

Her darkening eyes narrow at him. “Bullshit! Isabel, men are shitty. This is what you have to look forward to.”

“I’m sorry,” Isabel coos, eating fries and massaging Harmony’s feet at the same time. “It won’t be long now.”

My arm loops around Isabel, moving her into my lap. I lift her hand to feed her fires to my mouth. She gapes at me, her mouth wide-open. “Eat your own food, Hunter.”

“But I want yours,” I says, kissing her arm.

“No. No. No. You guys can’t be cute when I’m in pain and suffering,” Harmony declares. Then her face alters from anger to sudden surprise, her eyes expanding

comically. Her glance drops down to her lap. “Someone call the nurse. The baby’s coming.”

The nurses and doctor rush in.

And just like that I watch Ruby Isabel Tanner come into this world screaming at the top of her little lungs.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty*

*“Who’s Isabel?” Hank asks, moving the stinging prick of the tattoo gun across my skin.*

*“The love of my life I lost.”*

*“Aw, sorry, man. We gotta lot of silly fucks coming in gettin’ the Tat of Doom. Real stupid fuckers thinkin’ matching initials inked across the wrist is love branded for life.” He laughs humorlessly. “But remembering your girlfriend that passed is another story. It’s a better one. Sorry for your loss, man.”*

*Me too, I voice in my head.*

*I remain silent during the duration of my large tattoo.*

\*\*\*

*“I don’t want it, Hunter. You don’t love me. You wouldn’t love the baby.”*

*“Please, God, no.” I fall to my knees, gripping the hem of her dress. “Please. Please. I’ll do whatever you want. You won’t have to lift a finger. I’ll take care of the baby.”*

*“No,” she snaps, her voice cold and fierce. “I don’t want this thing growing inside of me.”*

*“Please, Sally,” I whisper, desperately pulling at her dress and pressing my face into her stomach. “It’s not a thing growing inside of you. It’s me. It’s you. It’s us.”*

*“It’s disgusting. That’s what it is,” she mutters, stepping back and harshly yanking my hands off her. My gut is twisted in knots that will never be untangled. “Don’t do this.”*

*She smiles through my watery gaze. “It’s already done.”*

*Sally’s found my weakness.*

*She’s going to kill me.*

\*\*\*

*The shovel falls to the ground with a heavy thud. Dusting dirt off my hands, I rise to my feet and take a step back to admire three rose bushes I’ve planted by the river, where I saw that deer drink years ago.*

*I stare at the blood-red roses that are strake against the green tint of the leaves. Three rose bushes for three babies I will never get to know, for three kids that will never call me dad, for three children I won’t get to raise, for three lives lost.*

*This place by the river has become a sacred sanctuary for me in a time of chaos. I come here to relax, to set my mind free, to gain my sanity, to pray.*

*Closing my eyes, I begin a prayer.*

*I pray for contentment and patience.*



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### *Something Special*

Staring at the round vintage diamond ring sitting perfectly in the velvet black case my grandfather gave me, I become anxious and even nervous. I run the tip of my finger around the halo of paved diamonds surrounding the large center stone and exhale the pent-up air I've been holding all day.

This is it.

I'm going to ask Isabel to marry me.

My heart is beating in my throat because there's a chance Isabel can always say no.

She would forever be sharing her life with me.

Does she really want that?

I have no idea, but I'm about to find out.

I pocket the ring making my way to my soon-to-be wife. Isabel is in the kitchen with a frosting bag in her hands, adding thick swirls of chocolate on top of cupcakes. She spends her time becoming a more qualified baker than me. She chops strawberries, placing them on top of the thick curl of chocolate frosting. My dick twitches in my pants, hardening at the sight of Isabel in my kitchen cutting strawberries and licking chocolate off her fingers.

I walk around the kitchen island and grab her hips, pulling Isabel back against my chest, so she can feel the bulge in my jeans.

“I’m busy, Hunter.”

I run my nose up the side of my neck, inhaling deeply. “You smell like chocolate and strawberries. The things I’d kill to do to you right now.”

Smiling, I lick the frosting off her fingers and she wiggles her ass against my groin. A guttural groan leaves my throat and my fingers dig into my flesh, gripping her sides more firmly, keeping her in place.

“Why don’t you just do the things you’d kill to do to me now?” she challenges.

My hand slides up her bare thigh, under her dress to cup her possessively between her legs. She inhales sharply and shudders. “I think I will, but later.”

Her breath leaves in a rush as my fingers find their way into her underwear and lightly stroke her. She moans and barely notices the cupcake she holds fall from her hands and drop to the floor.

“You love me?” I ask, grazing her earlobe with my teeth, sucking the sting away.

“Yes.”

My middle finger slides down the length of her slit, slipping inside her. Her breath hitches and she moves in my embrace, but I hold her tighter against me. “Good. I love too. Do you want to know how much I love you?”

She nods, squeezing her eyes shut when I push my finger deeper and swirl, brushing her clit with my thumb.

While my fingers keep her on edge and occupied, I pull out the ring from my pocket and slide it on her finger, bring her to climax at the same time. “Hunter,”

breathes, her knees going weak and her eyes flying open to stare at the antique ring glinting on her finger.

My arms tighten around her waist, holding her steady. “The ring belonged to my great-grandmother. My grandfather gave me it to me when I was eighteen and I wanted to give it to you back then. Marry me, baby.”

Her head slants to the side and her wide glossy eyes lock on to mine. “You wanted to propose to me when you where eighteen?”

I give her a squeeze and nod. “Only you, Isabel.”

“Since you where eighteen?” she asks in shock.

“Since the day I met you,” I whisper in her ear.

“Since the day I saw you on that tire swing, I wanted you all to myself. You’re it for me. There was no one else, trust me. I searched and came right back to you. In this universe, in this time, in this world, you can be mine and I can be yours. We’ll become best friends again. Then we’ll date; I’ll learn how to love you in all the right ways you deserve. We’ll travel the world. I’ll ask you to marry me in some ridiculously romantic way and we’ll have my babies, as many as you want. They’ll look like you, of course. We’ll raise them to be good and wholesome people. We’ll watch them grow up and get married and have babies of their own and spoil our grandkids to the limit as they get older. Then, and only then, when you’re old and gray by my side, I can die a fulfilled and sated man. That will be the story of our life.”

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Hunter,” she murmurs softly, kissing my mouth.

I lick the slat off her lips and she laughs, resting her forehead on the side of my neck. “I’m going to take care

of you and our children. Nothing comes before you and our kids, Isabel. You hear me, baby? Nothing and no one.”

“I believe you,” she says, touching my face.

“You’re all I need, the kids are a bonus.”

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We’re seated at a table in a corner of Lennae. I wanted to take her out and show her off, show the world just how overjoyed I am to be with her, to have her back and wearing my ring and having my baby in her belly. I mean, I do have the love of my life with me and she’s with me on her own free will. But though she sits across from me, her mind seems a million miles away. Something is bothering her.

Isabel looks down at her lap, fiddling with the linen tablecloth.

“What’s wrong, my sweet?”

Her body tenses suddenly and she gradually lifts her gaze to mine, her expression is a mask of guilt. “I got a job.”

“What job?” I ask, cutting into my grilled steak and eating it.

She twists her fork into her shrimp scampi, wrapping linguini noodles around it. “At Cherry Creek Hospital. I’m a NICU nurse—a neonatal nurse. I applied

a week ago.” She exhales a breath as if she held it in all day. “Are you mad at me?”

“No, Isabel. I’m not mad at you,” I say softly. “You laid it out there for me and said you wanted to work, so you do your thing and work. I’m not interested in holding you back from what you want out of life, baby. I’m here to support you and encourage you. I don’t want to hinder you, Isabel.”

Her face brightens, her frown turning into a stunned and dazzling smile. “Did I tell you how much I love you today?”

“Yes, but I like to hear it again.”

“I love you without limits Hunter Knight. I love you beyond reason, Hunter.”

“As you should,” I tease.

She laughs softly while taking bites off a breadstick. Isabel means too much to me. I don’t have the right to be upset with her for anything she has done or anything she will do, not after I kept her captive.

But that doesn’t mean she’s completely safe from me. “Now tell me who you belong to,” I order, sipping from my wine glass of sparkling water, growing hard from her dusky red lips that part instantly.

“I belong to you. You own me,” she whispers, her tongue darting out to swipe the scampi sauce off her lips.

My dick twitches in my pants and I swallow a groan with vivid thoughts of punishing Isabel in all the ways she will love for keeping this from me and thinking I would be angry with her. She reaches across the table and grabs my hand, interlocking our fingers. I squeeze her hand and she gives me a loving smile in return. This

amazing woman is going to be my wife soon. “I love you, Isabel.”

She grins, squirming in her seat and eating her food. “I love you, too, baby.”

When we get home, I have her wrists bind to the headboard with silk white ribbons and her legs spread with my head between them.

“Please,” she begs, her hips chasing after my mouth.

“No. Never keep things from me, Isabel,” I say, bringing her to brink of an orgasm and pulling her back again. “I told you deception doesn’t sit well with me, baby, from the very beginning.”

She yanks on her restraints and whines when they tighten. “I’m sorry. I’ll tell you everything, Hunter. I won’t keep anything from you. Please.”

“I don’t know,” I taunt, my fingers curling into the skin of her thighs and my tongue stroking her slit. “I have to think about this.”

“You cocky ba—”

She inhales sharply and shudders when I slip a finger in and press against her sensitive spot, slapping one of her thighs. “No, lip from you, Isabel. Now beg me to let you come.”

“Can I come, Hunter? Pretty *please*? I’ll be a good girl.”

“You’ll be my good girl?” I ask skeptically, kissing my reddened handprint embedded in her skin on her thigh.

Isabel shuts her eyes, her lips parting. “Yes.”

“Well,” I say through a grin, “in that case I guess I could be generous.” My finger dives deeper as I put my mouth on her, pressing her clit between my teeth with

my tongue. Her entire body convulses and she comes brutally.

The best part is that I get to watch her fall apart.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### Isabel

Curious eyes follow me as I make my way to Max's office. I can feel all of his employees staring at me, some with a narrowed glare calling me bitch and blatantly informing me that I have no right to be here. I'm positive from the outside looking in, I seem like a coldhearted whore who left Max without much of a goodbye to suffer and came back to only defend Hunter. I don't care what their perception is of me, because Max's opinion is the only one that counts.

There's still something raw and pained that needs to be settled between us, a chapter that we both need closure with before we begin a new page of our life story with different people. Plus, I need to give him his ring back he gave me for our engagement.

He's sitting at his large desk smiling at me, but conversing quickly on the phone when I step into his office. I shut his door and sit in the chair in front of his grand desk with my heart pounding in my chest with what I'm about to do.

Max ends his conversation, placing the shiny black phone on the cradle. His scrutinizing eyes roam over my face to my pale hospital scrubs, lingering on my ring Hunter gave me. His brows furrow, wrinkles creasing



his forehead. His expression darkens and saddens all at once.

“Max,” I say, drawing his attention back.

His lavender eyes shift up to mine and his mouth is tight when he greets me. “Isabel.”

“Hey.”

His face softens and he smiles a closed mouth smile. “Hey.”

I glance at his phone and back at him. “Did I interrupt something important? I can come back if you want.”

“Nothing’s more important than you sitting in my office right now, Pumpkin.”

“Okay,” I say, my pulse jumping in my neck. “I’m here to give your ring back.”

There.

I said it.

It’s better to get to the point, ripping it off like Band-Aid and get it over with.

His body jolts forward and stiffens instantly. “Why? Keep it. It’s yours.”

“Why?”

“I gave it to you. I don’t want it back. It’s yours, Isabel.”

“Are you sure?”

His eyes flash with irritation, or maybe impatience. “Absolutely.”

Nodding, I wipe my sweaty hands down the length of my knees. “I started training today.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah. It’s everything I thought it would be.”

His stunning eyes glitter with something that flares. "I'm glad for you, Pumpkinin."

"We're busy and I have short breaks, but I love it already."

"Good, Pumpkinin." He leans back in his leather chair and stares at me. My stomach does a flip as I avoid staring back at him. "Are you happy?"

"Yes. I told you I am already," I mumble, looking at my fisted hands in my lap and knowing he's asking about Hunter.

"Are you happy with Hunter?" In this instant we both know we failed each other. Every muscle in my body tenses and Max sees my reaction and senses his opening to condemn Hunter. "You can tell me, Isabel." His beautiful face gets severe, his voice darkly serious. "You can tell me anything."

I force my trembling mouth to form a smile. "I'm happy."

His features contort to a perplexed one. "What can he do for you?"

"Give me the world."

Max briefly shuts his eyes, bowing his head with pain etched in his features. "Are you sure about that?"

"Are you sure you want to hear what I have to say?" I ask tentatively.

He nods with his hard eyes on mine. "I'm listening."

"Okay," I say, taking in a deep breath. "I need to tell you how wrong I am for not having the courage to cut you loose the right way. I did it all wrong and I didn't give you a warning beforehand."

His face contorts with surprise and pain. "Isabel—"

“No,” I say. “I need to get this off my chest. I was wrong for how I handled you, and I’m sorry. I can’t say sorry enough. I had you worrying about me to the extent you had to launch an investigation.” I pause to wipe at my watery eyes. “I caused you grief and heartache. All of it was unwarranted. I’m so sorry, Maxi-pie.” I force the next words out. “Hunter makes me beyond happy. He gives me strength when I feel weak. He makes me smile when all I want to do is cry. Hunter gives me rest. I can sleep next to him and won’t wake until he urges me to.”

“You can sleep? Hunter gives you rest?”

“The best,” I sniff.

“He gives you rest?” he asks more to himself.

“Yes.”

His expression turns blank, his face ashen. “I could never give you rest, Isabel. You and I both know that. You never slept peacefully beside me.”

“Max—”

“I’m pleased you get rest, Pumpkin. Go be with your fiancé.”

“Max.” I choke on his name.

His lips press together, his glassy eyes staring at the door beyond me. “Go, Isabel.”

I’m visually trembling when I lift myself up. I take a step towards Max and then halt, looking at him. His hard gaze slides from the door to me. I take another step and then another until I’m around his desk and my arms are around him. “I love you, Max.”

He exhales and gives me a squeeze. “I love you, too. But you’re making this difficult, Pumpkin.”

“You made me happy.”

“It wasn’t enough,” he mutters through gritted teeth.  
“And not enough isn’t good enough for you.”

I bury my face in his suit jacket, my hands coiling  
around his neck and I begin to weep.

Max strokes my hair. “It will be alright Isabel.”

“But will you be?”

“I will,” he murmurs into my hair. “I have Maxwell  
and Lily.”

“You have a beautiful family, Maxi-pie.”

I feel his grin in my hair. “I do, Pumpkin.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty*

*The steam from the shower drifts in a hazy cloud from the open door of the bathroom. My palms are sweaty when I press them together in my lap. Sally's in the shower. She's expecting me for dinner. I showed, but not for what she wants.*

*I came to break the chain of misery she has draped around my throat. I came to officially end things with her. I've been afraid for so fucking long now. I've been living in constant fear. That's unacceptable. I don't need to fear Sally or Grace anymore. Sally has aborted my babies and Grace can't touch Isabel now, and if she did, I wouldn't hesitate to slit her throat like I've imagined for the past ten years.*

*Tonight, I will end things.*

*Tonight, I will be free.*

*I settle on Sally's luxurious bed and watch as she strolls out the marble bathroom with a plush yellow towel wrapped around her body. Her dark eyes run down the length of me. She doesn't conceal the curl of her lip or the harden irritation in her eyes. I know she*

*genuinely doesn't like me. I'm not Sally's dream man by any means. She wants me because I don't want her. She wants what she can't have.*

*"You can't wear a sweatshirt and jeans to dinner, Hunter," she chides as she lowers herself down to her white stool in front of her vanity table. "You have a tux in my closet. I have to keep several in case an event called for it, which is now. You never dress well. You have a body made for suits. But you stay in your street wear. I'm glad I know you well enough like I do. I have saved us time."*

*She twists open a dainty green bottle of lotion and lathers her skin in cream without needing me to voice my opinion or concern because she carries the entire conversation by herself. "We won't stay long, only long enough to keep up our appearance and then I have a flight to Seattle I have to catch."*

*Good.*

*She's leaving.*

*But I have a strong feeling she won't be in such a hurry when I tell her what I have to say.*

*Her calculating eyes meet mine in the mirror as she slides a comb through her wet hair. "While I like you brooding and silent, I need you to get dressed. We don't have a lot of time."*

*"I'm not going anywhere."*

*She gives me a dismissive laugh with a roll of her eyes. "It's dinner, Hunter. Don't be childish."*

*"We're done."*

*She calmly sets the comb down and turns on her stool to face me, her expression carefully masked. "What does that mean exactly?"*

*I scrub my stubble with my hand, holding her gaze. "It means we're done. It means I will never fuck you again. It means you will no longer have any power to keep torturing me."*

*Her mask of aloofness cracks in front of me and I witness the initial flicker of panic cross her face. "You can't be done with me. You can never be done with me, Hunter."*

*I don't say anything.*

*There is no convincing Sally of anything.*

*There is no persuading her.*

*She believes what she wants to believe in that sick and twisted head of hers.*

*So I save my breath.*

*I simply get up and leave.*

*Small fingers curl around my arm. I shake her off, focused on my task of getting the hell out of here.*

*"If you go, I will do it, Hunter," Sally threatens as I reach for the golden latch of her front door.*

*Taking a risk, I glance back. She holds the sharp edge of a butcher knife up against her throat, her hand trembling and her expression is solemn.*

*"No, you won't," I reply almost inaudible, shifting my gaze back to the latch. "You're too vain."*

*"Never underestimate me, Hunter."*

*I hear the clink of the knife landing on the marble floor when she throws it, then a loud piercing cry fills the silence like static.*

*My entire body tenses, the erratic beating of my heart like thunder in my ears.*

*I'm afraid again.*

*I'm afraid to turn around.*

*More of her ear-shattering screams echo throughout her condo, reverberating of my chilled skin.*

*My jaw clenches, my fists balling at my sides.*

*Fuck.*

*She keeps screaming.*

*She's hurting herself.*

*I don't want to look.*

*I don't.*

*But I do.*

*And wished I hadn't.*

*I watch in stunned horror as she slams her naked body against the brick wall without any caution. Her skin is beginning to bruise. Her wrist bone is protruding from the skin of her wrist. Her face is swollen. Her lip is split open.*

*None of these things stop her from banging herself up.*

*I have to physically stop her and contain her in my arms. She isn't crying. Sally laughs hysterically, nuzzling into me. "You can never leave me, Hunter." She hooks her unbroken arm around my neck, pulling me into her. "Never, Hunter. You're going to always be mine. Forever."*

*Just like that Sally's leash around my neck tightens.*

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*The wind is bone-chilling cold up here. The  
brilliance of the full moon shines high in the sky, gracing  
me with soft silver light. I'm canceled in a shadowy  
corner of the hospital rooftop while Sally's down in the  
x-ray room, getting her broken wrist scanned. The look  
on everyone's faces was fucking priceless when I  
brought Sally in all beat-up and broken. I could see their  
accusing expressions from a million miles away.*

*Hunter Knight.*

*The wicked man who would dear beat a woman.*

*Hunter Knight.*

*The spoiled rich asshole who thinks highly of  
himself.*

*Hunter Knight.*

*The fucking joke of the town.*

*Shutting my eyes, I lean my head back on a wall of  
bricks and exhale very slowly through my nose. I can't  
be with Sally anymore. I don't care if she gets hysterical  
and bangs herself against walls. She's going to be the  
death of me like Grace wants if I stay trapped in this  
toxic web of betrayal, lie, and deceit.*

*The heartache Sally has caused doesn't compare to  
the ever-present pain of giving up Isabel forever. Sally  
gave me the worst brand of agony. She gave me misery  
that blindsides me when I'm alone in the darkness yanks  
me into the deep ocean of torture where my screams and  
nightmares are played like lullabies.*

*Sally wanted to cause great devastation in my life.*

*She won.*

*I've taken all I can take with Sally.*

*She exhausted me.*

*She ruined me.*

*She smashed the last remaining shards of my soul into dust.*

*I have nothing left inside of me.*

*Not even rage...*

*Someone comes through the door on the side, their feet shuffling through the gravel on the rooftop. My eyes open to a shapely silhouette with flowing hair gleaming like dark red wine in the moonlight. She carefully balances herself on the ledge of the building.*

*I push to my feet, already knowing who she is. "I thought we were past this."*

*She jolts forward, startled by me. I'm quick and swift when I grab her arm. "Hunter."*

*"In the flesh," I say, wiping away her glittering tears from her face.*

*We sit on the ledge, our legs dangling over the building. We hold hands. "Do you ever think that we're just born to die, Hunter?"*

*I stare at the pretty woman with the red hair, thinking how people will never know how deep and cheerless Candy really is. "Sometimes. What's on your mind?"*

*"Pills and dying," she answers truthfully. "Mama says everyone has a weakness and a breaking point. It just so happens that the both of mine hit me at once."*

*"What's the matter, Candy?" I ask softly.*

*She blows out a breath, staring straight ahead at nothing but the sea of glowing stars. "My stupid ex-boyfriend is blackmailing with a video."*

*"What kind of video?" I ask, my thumb running down the length of hers.*

*I know it's dark but I still witness red color her pale cheeks. "We made a...sex tape. He wanted to try something new and exciting and I fell for it. His agenda was to only get me on camera and I fell for it." She squeezes my hand, closing her eyes and tossing her head back with pain and anguish washing over her face. "I fell for it, Hunter. I'm so stupid. I want to die."*

*Clenching my jaw, I push down the anger. I'm not upset with Candy. She's too sweet. It's the fucker using her I want to beat the shit out of. "What does he want?"*

*"Money. He's a heroin addict. Always shooting up, always high."*

*"How much does he want?"*

*"Five thousand dollars," she says quietly. "I don't have five thousand dollars."*

*"Can you show me where he lives?"*

*She nods.*

*"Good."*

*"Are you gonna pay him off?"*

*"I'm going to kick his ass before I strangle him for taking advantage of your kindness."*

*Her shimmering eyes widen, her pouty lips parting. She looks awestruck.*

*I look down at her hand in mine.*

*This could work.*

*Candy is sweet.*

*Candy isn't Isabel.*

*But Candy isn't Sally either.*

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

### *Nurse Isabel*

Isabel twists her damp hair in a high bun at the top of her head and secures it with a thick silver ornate barrette clip. She pins her name badge to the front of her shirt pocket of her light blue scrubs. Watching Isabel get ready for work, the reality is sinking in that she'll have a life outside of just being with me. Though this fills me with trepidation, I'm not going to fuck this up for her. She wants this and I'm not going to mess this up for the life of me.

I want her to be happy.

I want to cure her sadness.

She takes a long glance at the full-length mirror and then turns to face me, her face bright and refreshing.

She's beaming. "How do I look?"

"Beautiful."

"My first official day," she says through a shaky murmur. "I'm nervous. What if I do something wrong?"

"You won't. You've been accident-free so far, baby. Don't stress or sike yourself out." Taking a step forward, I wrap my arms around her and embrace her tightly to me. "You're going to do just fine, Isabel. Everyone will love you."

She buries her face in the material of my shirt.  
“You’re still coming to sit with me for lunch?”

“Yes.”

Her arms tighten around me. “Good.”

My eyes shut and I soak in the sweetness of her presence. This is going to be a challenge for me, but I have to get over this for us.

“I’m going to be late,” she whispers softly.

I give her a firm squeeze before releasing her. “I love you, Isabel.”

She smiles, showing how deep her fondness runs for me and then she scoops up her car keys from the breakfast bar. “Love you more, Hunter.”

The rest of my day is wasted on clicking through stuff my agent sent me in my email and thinking about Isabel’s first day at work.

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Isabel sits beside a male nurse at a wooden bench table in the courtyard of Cherry Creek Hospital. They both seem to be in deep conversation. He absently picks apart a sandwich and then leans in way too close for comfort and says something in her ear, which causes her to choke on the water she’s sipping. He laughs and pats her back a few times, his hand lingering and taking full advantage of touching her. I don’t like him. He’s too physical with her. He’s touching Isabel with every open opportunity he has. Isabel doesn’t seem bothered by it, but that shit is not going to fly with me.

Red is all I see when my feet carry me to them with long strides and I have no control when I set her lunch on the table and brace by hands on the edge of the wood, inclining towards him until I'm all he can see. "Touch her again and I'll break both of your damn hands along with all of your curious fingers."

The smirk on his face instantly falls and his expression is one of a panicked, distraught animal caught in my snare. "Whoa, bubby. Take it easy," he mumbles in caution, holding his hands palm up in defeat as if he stole something and got caught.

Clenching my teeth, I work my jaw.

*He touched her.*

His breathing quickens and I can smell the stench of his fishy breath from where I am. This fucker was eating tuna and had his fucking breath in her ear, breathing down her neck.

"Hunter, I'm okay. He's Jimmy. He works with me," Isabel murmurs, hooking an arm around my waist and looking up at me with understanding eyes.

My gaze drops down to her gentle face and, honestly, that's the only thing keeping me from punching the fuck out of him. My jaw tenses and I feel a muscle jerk in my cheek. "He touched you."

Her eyes shift to Jimmy and then back at me. "I'm fine, Hunter. He was just telling me a really good joke."

I cradle her face in my hands, gliding the pads of my thumbs across her naturally dusky red lips. "No one gets to touch you, Isabel."

Her remarkable green-hazel eyes roam over my face and her expressions turns tender. "No one touches

me, baby.” A huge relief is off my shoulders as soon as she repeats me.

“No one ever touches you,” I say, pressing my forehead to hers. “Not ever, Isabel.”

“No one but you, Hunter,” she says, running her hands down my back in a soothing motion. Her sweet breath fans across my face and I wish I could hold it all inside of me because even that is too precious to be wasted. “Now are you going to feed me, or scare the hell out of all my coworkers?”

My cheeks lift in a smile for only her. “My baby’s hungry, then I need to feed her.”

Taking the seat Jimmy vacated, I sit on the bench, watching Isabel eat the lunch I prepared for her and I grin while her overly friendly coworker, Jimmy, scoots to the very end of the bench to finish his tuna sandwich with an ashen face to match the soggy white bread he holds between his trembling hands.

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I stare at the yellowing envelopes Taylor gave me three years ago with Isabel’s name slashed across one and printed neatly on the other. There are two envelopes for Isabel. One is from her father. The other is from her mother. I’ve never read them, but Taylor asked me to give these to Isabel when she’s ready. I’m not going to give them to her now. Isabel’s still recovering. She’s

doing an exceptional job thus far, and I don't plan to interfere with her progress.

With a heavy heart, I carefully place the fragile envelopes back in my safe and lock it for a day when she's ready.

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It takes a month for us to get settled into our new life with each other. I get up every morning and take her to work and pick her up every evening. I join her for lunch only a few times. Isabel seems to enjoy her independence and I don't want to tarnish that by getting in her face every chance I can. I've found some good qualities in having her working. The very best part of having a partner that works all day is that every night I get to witness Isabel climb in bed with me, telling me about the good and not-so good parts of her day. I get lie in bed with Isabel cuddled in my arms and my nose buried in her berry-scented hair and listen to everything she has to say, never getting tired of hearing her voice.



## CHAPTER FIFTY

### *Two Heartbeats*

Isabel and I sit in one of Dr. Marvin's clinical rooms. Today she gets her first ultrasound. We get to hear the heartbeat and find out the sex of our baby. I have yet to clear all of Hero's things out of his room in my house and pack them in boxes, then sending them to storage until I get my house renovated for a much bigger family. I'll never turn Hero away. We had way too much of that growing up. Hero will always be welcomed to my home and in my life. He's my baby brother and I'll be responsible for him until the day I die...

Isabel gasps and shifts on the examination table, the thin white crepe paper crackling noisily underneath her.

I rise to my feet and stand over her as if I can somehow help her. My mind is as frantic as her expression. "What's wrong?"

"The baby's kicking," she says through a smile. She takes my hand and places it on the side of her little belly. "Come feel." A sudden thump nudges my palm and I smile so wide my cheeks are aching. A burst of fierce pride erupts low in my stomach and spreads quickly throughout my body.

I did that.

That's my child inside of her.

She grins and tilts her head towards me, her eyes wide and shimmering. “How does it feel?”

“Like heaven,” I whisper.

She sets her hand on top of mine, entwining our fingers together. “We’re having a baby, Hunter.”

Nodding, I sweep her dark hair from her forehead. “No going back now, Isabel.”

“I know,” she says as I wipe the tears rolling down her cheeks with my fingers.

“Ready to get started?” Dr. Marvin asks, tapping on the door before walking in.

“Yes,” she says as I hold her hand tight in mine.

“Alright, let’s get started then,” he replies, snapping white latex gloves on and rolling up her blouse until her tiny baby bump is fully exposed. He sits on his rolling stool and grabs a bottle, squirting a generous amount of clear gel on the top of her stomach and begins to move the scanner around.

The heartbeat is a strong one and it’s all I can hear.

Isabel and I both look at the monitor, showing her womb in black and white.

He clicks and types something in the keyboard and clicks again.

Isabel gives my hand a squeeze.

I return the squeeze and kiss her nose.

He looks at the monitor and moves the scanner down her lower abdomen and the width of her ribs. His brows furrow.

“Is something wrong, Doc?” I ask.

“Hmm.” He clicks and moves the scanner again.

“There are two heartbeats. Congrats. She’s pregnant with

fraternal twins. You have a boy and a girl. The girl was hiding. I had to double check.”

We both release our pent-up breath and smile at each other.

“The babies are healthy?” I ask, feeling incredibly mystified knowing she has twins inside of her, my twins inside of her.

“As far as I can see,” he replies. “Look here. Do see their arms and legs and little feet.”

We both nod, speechless.

“Mom’s healthy and so are the youngsters.” He clicks something and a row of photos begin to print from the machine. He wipes her belly clean and she pulls down her shirt. Dr. Marvin removes his gloves and washes his hands and then turns to face us. “Have you been having any problems or pain I should know about?”

“No. I just feel like a stretching balloon now.”

“Oh, it gets better,” he says in sympathetic tone, patting her arm. “Wait until you get into your third trimester.” He snatches the photos from the machine and hands them to me. “I treated your broken bones and tummy aches and gave you both lollops at the end of your visits. Now you’re going to have children that I’ll have to tend to and treat.” His bows his head, peering over his red glasses resting on the bridge of his nose and his bushy brows rise to his hairline. “I have my work cut out for me.”

Isabel and I glance at one another and burst into laughter.

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We stop at Roxy's Diner for dinner. Isabel brings a few fries to her mouth and chomps on them while her free hand clutches the ultrasound pictures, her fingers curling around the edges. "I can't believe we're having twins."

"Are you worried?"

"No and yes," she answers, never removing her eyes from the photos. "I know you'll be the best father you can be. I just don't want them to endure the excruciating heartache we had to endure."

"They will never have to," I reply, reaching across the table to hold her hand.

"What about Grace?"

"She doesn't exist for them, or us."

"Is it that simple?"

"If I say it is."

Isabel exhales and nods, taking a sip of her strawberry shake. The top of her nose is dusted with a thick white layer of whipped cream when she leans back in the booth. I place my elbows on the table and lean forward, my face serious and my eyes on her. "Come here, baby."

Her pretty mouth spreads into a grin, her brows furrow in confusion. "What?"

I lift a brow, fighting an impish grin. "Come here."

Her head tilts to the side as she eyes me skeptically. "What is it, Hunter?"

"Come. Here. Now."

She stands, moves around the table and sits directly beside me in the booth. “Happy?” she asks, sarcasm bleeding from her tone.

Grasping her chin between my pinched fingers, I lick the cream off her nose and press my mouth to hers. She clamps her lips together in defiance and I drag the tip of my tongue across the seam of her sweet pouty mouth that tastes of the finest strawberries. I bite the edge of her jaw hard enough for her lips to part in a stunned gasp and I take advantage, slipping my tongue inside and kissing her deeply. She groans into my mouth, her hands reaching up to knot firmly in my hair. I only break the kiss when she’s breathless and squirming. Slowly trailing my lips up the curve of her jaw line and pressing them to her ear, I whisper, “Now I am.”

She laughs in delight, curling her fingers in my hair. “I make you happy?”

“You make my life.”

Her eyes gloss over and her expression gets soft. Her fingers run throughout the length of my hair and she tugs it lightly once she reaches my nape. “I make your life?”

“Every day,” I whisper in her ear.

She leans in further, placing her lips at my ear.

“You’re all I dreamt about, Hunter.”

“You’re all I ever wanted, Isabel,” I say to her neck before pressing a kiss there. “You’re all I need.”

Her fingers get tense in my hair, the pain spiking throughout my scalp and shooting straight to my dick. She loosens her grip a moment later, snuggling into me. “You’re worth all my suffering, Hunter. I’ll take the misery if I get to have you in the end.”

My heart almost splits from the sadness in her voice. “Baby,” I murmur, my nose gliding up her neck and feeling the weight of her words in my chest.

“I love it when you call me ‘baby’ when you’re inside of me,” she says through a grin. “But I love you saying that more right now.”

One of my hands drop to her legs below the table and I stroke her bare thigh that the fabric of her skirt fails to cover. “You hungry, baby?” I ask, not referring to food at all.

She pulls back to look at me, her eyes have gone dark with and the desire within them is enough to steal my breath. They’re almost black. “I’m starving.”

At her words, my cock twitches. “Let’s get you fed then.”

I make sure Isabel is stuffed full when we get home. I feed her so much that she falls asleep on my chest with me still inside of her.

Isabel has me.

All that I know is I’m fallen for her.

I’m completely gone for her.

She’s better than I imagined her to be in my wildest fantasies.

I love this girl with everything I am and with everything I will be.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty-one  
Tyler age seventeen*

*The rain is heavy and cold as it pours down on us. By chance, I saw Tyler on The Suicide Bridge, looking down at the rapids and jagged rocks as if he wanted to join them. I pressed on the brake so fast my body violently jolted forward, my head hitting the steering wheel.*

*My hand unclips the seatbelt and I open the door, stumbling out. Warm blood trickles from my forehead, disorientation tries to settle but I shake it off. I clutch my fingers over the wound and stagger towards Tyler.*

*“What are you doing, Tyler?”*

*“Have you ever thought about sacrificing yourself for the sake of others? If you were to die, then that would benefit the people you love.”*

*“What the hell are you talking about?”*

*His eyes are empty when he stares at me. “I’ve been keeping secrets from everyone, but especially Isabel.”*

*“What kind of secrets?”*

*“My mother has a twin sister, Lily, who has a child Taylor. You remember Taylor, right? She’s my cousin, and then there’s Naya. I know you know about Naya.”*

*My brows furrow. I have no idea what he’s talking about. “What about Naya?”*

*“She’s my twin sister, Hunter. Haven’t you ever wondered why she looked so much like me and Isabel, why she’s so different from the blue-eyed blonde-haired children Grace had?”*

*I squint from the pain bouncing in my head. “She’s your twin sister?”*

*He nods, laughing unamused. “I know everything. Someone is after me now.” He pauses for a moment, looking down at the silvery rushing river below. “I see Grace has kept you busy, busy enough to miss everything around you. You need to wake up, Hunter. I don’t have a lot of time left now.”*

*He takes a step forward, getting to close to the ledge. I pull him back and yank him up by the lapels of his coat and shake him. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re talking crazy. Why the fuck would you try to kill yourself, knowing you’ll ruin Isabel.”*

*“Like you have?” he asks somberly.*

*Dropping him as if he stung me, I let him go. “What the fuck, Tyler?”*

*“It’s in motion now. The web of deception is unraveling.”*

*“What web of deception?”*

*His green eyes glinting dark in the midnight drift up to me. “You hungry?”*

*“Sure,” I say, knowing he wants to talk to me and explain everything, because Grace has kept me busy with*



*Sally. Sally was nothing more than a distraction to keep me blinded while Grace caused chaos and destruction.*

*He has all of my attention.*

*I wonder who the hell is after him.*

*“I have a box of Lucky Charms with our name on it.”*

*“You lead, I’ll follow.”*

*We get to his house and eat Lucky Charms.*

*Tyler tells me everything*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

### *Head Games & Partition*

Isabel smooths the sexy black sleeve dress down her hips. The dress stops several inches above her knees. I watch with morbid interest as Isabel turns at different angles in the full-length mirror, admiring herself. Victor made this creation of black lace that has had me hard for the past half hour. She says it's a girls' night and she's going out with Harmony and some friends from work. They're going to Stone Vine, a luxurious fine dining restaurant outside of town.

I lean back on the bed, releasing a heavy sigh when she slips into a pair of black shiny fuck me high heels. My instincts are telling me this is a test that I will fail miserably at.

For one, she's leaving town.

For two, she looks strikingly beautiful and that dress and those heels are causing me to become sick with envy at anyone else who gets the viewing pleasure to witness her in them.

For three, she's leaving town.

"It's only dinner, Hunter," she says to my neck after she lies gently on top of me, hugging me.

My hands stroke up and down the line of her spine. "You're leaving town."

“Only for a little while. A few hours at most,” she says, sliding her nose down the side of my neck and kissing the edge of my jaw. “I’ll be home right back to you tonight.”

Shutting my eyes, I hold her tighter against me and breathe in her berry-scented hair. “A few hours away from you is too long for me. I don’t like this.”

“Hunter,” she admonishes softly, her fingers tapping against my lips. “You trust me, right?”

“I do.”

“Then stop worrying. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s impossible not to worry about you, Isabel.” I nip two of her fingertips and she gasps, quickly pulling her hand away from my mouth. “What did I tell you about putting your hands near a greedy animal’s mouth? You’re going to get bit, baby. Always.”

“You’re the only greedy animal I know around here,” she teases, rubbing her cheek against my chest like the little kitten she is.

I narrow my eyes, jerking my head back. “Animal you say? I’m a fucking dragon, girl.” Joking around with her is the best kind of remedy for all of my problems that continue to stress me out.

She throws her head back and laughs musically. Isabel clutches my neck with both hands, shoving her face in my throat. I shiver and bite back a groan. I love when she’s this close to me. “Yeah, baby. You’re my mighty dragon.”

Grinning, my hands glide up her legs and bare thighs. Using my fingers, I draw silhouettes on her skin at the apex of her thighs. “Your dragon needs a taste of you to hold him over for the meanwhile.”

“But you’re going to mess my hair up,” she protest in a breathy voice.

“Mhmm,” I mumble, swiftly turning her over and laying flat on her on her back.

“But it took me a really long time to do it,” she murmurs, propping up on her elbows to watch my descent down her body. She’s all bark because she’s not putting up much of a fight.

Skimming my nose along the width of her thigh, I lightly sink my teeth into her.

Her lips part in a loud gasp, her eyes expanding and her face flushing. Desire flares within her and something dark and feral comes alive inside of her glossy orbs. With a heavy grunt she pushes at my chest until I allow her to pin me to the mattress. Her small hands hold mine down, pressing them high above my head.

She bends her head and leans forward, staring right into my eyes. “You bit me.”

“I did,” I say mockingly, feeling my dick stir in my pants, pushing against my zipper. “What are you going to do about it?”

Isabel grinds her hips roughly on top of mine and I take in a sharp breath. “You shouldn’t have done that, baby.” She drags her mouth across my cheek and bites my bottom lip, tugging roughly at it. She nips me with her teeth. I grunt when she breaks skin. Isabel licks the red droplet from my bottom lip. “I’m going to have to torture you now.”

“I like the idea of that, my sweet.”

She lifts a challenging brow and the impish gleam in her eyes intensifying. “We shall see.” Isabel lifts my shirt to place feather-light kisses across the skin of my

abdomen. My muscles in my core tighten and constrict at the sensation of her soft lips marking me and the anticipation of where she's heading. She hastily unbuckles my belt and yanks it free from all the loops in my jeans.

Isabel pops the button of my pants free, unzips it and pulls my jeans down until they reach my ankles. She plants her face in my groin and inhales deeply. I have to bite back a smile and laughter. "I've been waiting three years to do this."

"Do what?" I ask, knowing exactly what she's talking about.

Isabel looks up at me and narrows her eyes into slits. "You know."

At the sight of her face stuffed in my crotch, I should be laughing hysterically. But the scene is visually erotic and I'm trying very hard not to just thrust myself in her mouth. I have never let Isabel go down on me. I've never let anyone go down on me before. The act itself seems too intimate and I have no control over it. I didn't grow up with a lot of intimacy and going down on someone is the ultimate intimate act, so I get highly uncomfortable when it comes to having oral sex performed on me.

But Isabel gets what she wants.

Always.

"You know what I want to do," she murmurs, caressing me through my boxers.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I bite down on my bottom lip hard and taste the sharp tang of my blood from where she nipped me. "Say it."

“Say what?” she asks with false innocence, batting her thick lashes at me.

“Say you want to suck my cock, Isabel.”

She looks away briefly and grins at the wall, then turns her gaze back to me. “I want to suck your cock, Hunter.”

“Not good enough, baby,” I provoke, managing to keep a scowl on my face. “That doesn’t sound too convincing. Say you want to suck my cock like you mean it.”

She squeezes me harshly in her hand and I grunt in more pleasure than pain. She kisses my navel. “I want to suck your cock, baby. I want to make you come so hard you lose your sight and see stars. Now, well you be a good boy and let me suck your dick? Please?”

My brows lift to my hairline and I can’t help but smile. “You may since you’ve asked so nicely.”

She reaches into the elastic waistband of my boxers and pulls out my hard cock, her fingers unable to wrap fully around me. Isabel looks down at my hardness in her hand, her gleeful eyes expanding. She leans forward with her lips puckered and plants a kisses the tip. My abdomen tightens like a stretched rubber band. I exhale very slowly. Damn that feels good. If I’m not careful, then I’m going to come before I get the full pleasure of experiencing her mouth for the first time.

“Do you like that?” She asks, smiling wickedly and still gripping my cock in her hand. She squeezes it a few times. “Does it feel good?”

My eyelashes involuntarily flutter closed. “Such a fucking tease.”

“Mm,” she mumbles, leisurely sliding her soft lips up and down my hard length. “You didn’t answer my question, baby.”

“You’re touching and kissing my cock, of course it feels good.”

I watch as her pink tongue comes out to lick the droplet of fluid oozing from the tip. She dips her head down, her tongue touching the base of the shaft, running all the way under it to my tip, licking along the my slit.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my chest heaving and my breath leaving out of my mouth in rugged grunts. “Oh, fuck.”

“I can taste you, Hunter,” Isabel says, beginning to lick faster, lapping at the head of my cock. “You taste really good. I like the taste of you so much that I could spread you on dry toast and eat you for breakfast.”

I burst into genuine laughter, but I have to stop immediately because I’m about three seconds away from erupting. Reaching, down I stroke her cheek of her face with my hand. She pauses to kiss my palm. “I love you, Isabel. Only you can make me laugh while receiving the best blow job of my existence. But I’m dying here, baby. Your teasing is killing me.” Pouting, I make the most pathetic face I can. “Don’t you think I suffered enough?”

She moans, the vibration flowing through her lips into my cock.

I have to force my hands into fist tightly in the sheets because it taking every ounce of my self-control to not grip her by the hair and fuck her face with abandonment until I’m contentedly relieved.

My balls have never felt heavier.

God damn it!

Isabel's the master of head games.

To my surprise, she closes her warm and wet mouth around me and sucks earnestly like she came to lose. I smile inwardly at my joke. If I say that out loud, I wonder if she'd tell me how much of a smug bastard I am before she bites my dick in two.

With enthusiastic persistence Isabel suddenly cups my balls in her warm palm and squeezes hard, sucking all of me in her heavenly mouth with so much intense pressure it feels as though my ears will pop and my brain will explode.

She stops suddenly, tilting her head to the side. "Do you hear something?"

Mimicking her, I tilt my head and hear absolutely nothing but the sound of the wind outside. "No," I mutter through gritted teeth. "Fuck, baby. I need your mouth back."

"Hunter," she says, gripping me tightly in her hand. "I could have sworn I heard a car."

"Baby," I groan desperately pained, on the verge of a temper tantrum. "Mouth. Now."

She smirks, bending her head to take my throbbing dick inside of her pretty mouth once again and out of nowhere, a loud horn beeps twice, blaring throughout the silence of the woods.

"Got to go, honey," Isabel says, rising to her feet too quickly.

I prop up on my shaky elbows, lifting myself to look at her. "C'mon, baby. You can't leave me like this."

The evil gleam in her eyes flares as she stares down at my engorged cock lying on my stomach. Then it occurs to me that she planned this entire thing. "Aw,



poor baby. It looks so angry lying there like that.” She winks and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “I would kiss it and make it better, but I really do have to get going.” She turns her back to me and walks out the room.

“Isabel, wait,” I call out, scrambling to my feet, pulling up boxers and almost tripping over my jeans that are tied and knotted around ankles.

That little devil.

When the hell did she do that?

“Isabel!”

I look up in time to see her reaching for the latch of the front door with her back still to me. She gives me a unconcerned wave. “Bye, Hunter.”

“Fuck!” I pull up my pants and follow her, but she’s already inside the glossy black limo with bunch of giggling females and they’re all drunk.

The darkly tinted window rolls down and Harmony sticks her head out, her thick blonde curls falling in her face. “My Baby Daddy loves me. He got me car service so I could drink all I want. We’re going to rock out with our cocks out, Hunter! Fuck men. Women rule!”

All the girls cheer in laughter.

Isabel pushes Harmony back into her seat and gives me an apologetic smile through the window. “She’s drunk. She started early. Love you, Hunter.”

My mouth is agape as I watch the limo speed off. After staring down the dark empty street for infinite amount of time in disbelief, I lie on my back in bed and stare at the ceiling with my aching dick in my hand, stroking while I think about how Isabel left me completely defenseless with blue balls.

Exhaling heavily, I glance down at my throbbing cock that only seems to get harder.

She had fun torturing me.

Isabel planned this.

Frowning, I give my dick another harsh stroke, getting nowhere.

“Fuck it.”

Slipping on my clothes and lacing up my black boots, I pull on my jacket and snatch my truck keys off the counter. I'm going to make the long drive out of town to Stone Vine and drag Isabel out kicking and screaming, then lead her back to my truck so I can retaliate by fucking her face senseless while I spank her ass for leaving me in this condition.

She's going to pay.

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It takes me a good hour and a half to arrive at Stone Vine. I hand the valet my keys and continue through the velvet rope entry into the lavish five star dining restaurant that also serves as a night club below. I give Falcon's last name to the smiling hostess dressed in a posh black suit with her jet-black hair tied into a tight bun at the back of her head. She nods and tells me to wait a moment, then a slender young man with wiry ash brown hair appears dressed in the identical black suit as the hostess. He leads me to a bank of sleek elevators and presses a code into the button panel. We begin to descend smoothly down in comfortable silence.

Electronic music comes alive and erupts in fast pace harmony when the elevator doors slide apart. I follow the guy throughout the multicolored dry ice haze of smoke, the heavy beats booming out the speakers vibrating under the soles of my boots.

I spot Isabel sipping bright yellow liquid from a tall glass that has a wide rim coated in crystals before he leads me to their blood-red booth. "I got it from here," I tell him. He nods and disappears into the teeming crowd of glow sticks and sweaty bodies. I take a sit on the high stool once I reach the bar.

"Can I offer you anything to drink, sir?" a guy with dark dreadlocks asks.

Nodding, I lift my chin in Isabel's direction. "I'll have what the girl in the black dress is drinking."

He follows my gaze and grins knowingly, nodding. A short while later he slides me a large glass filled with the same electric yellow drink on a napkin. I hand him a bill and press my lips to the coated sugar crystals on the rim, taking a big gulp.

It's lemonade.

Settling on the stool, I lean my back against the bar and intently watch Isabel. She claps her hands and laughs in pure delight at something Harmony says. One of the girls comes back to the table with two armfuls of glowing accessories. She hands Isabel the glow-in-the-dark bunny ears and they all rush to the dance floor when a Beyoncé song comes on, laughing.

The attractive girl with long thick ringlets of dark hair flowing down her back runs her hands down the length of Isabel's legs. She's one of Isabel's coworker friends and she's just as drunk as Harmony is, but that

doesn't stop her from pressing against Isabel or Isabel grinding against her like a pussycat in heat. The sweet drink becomes tasteless in my mouth as I watch the women seductively dance on each other. They're all hair swinging, tits jiggling, and ass swaying. My dick is instantly furious with me yet again.

Pushing off the stool, I ease into the sea of bodies, my gaze sharp on her.

\*\*\*

## **Isabel**

"I want to fuck you senseless in that dress until you scream my name," Hunter whispers into my ear.

A fierce shudder ripples down my spine and my heart pounds hard in my chest, bouncing off my ribs. Every facet in my body tingles and I become instantly wet by his crude words. I open my eyes not the least surprised to see him here in front of me. "Took you long enough."

He gives me a wicked grin that has my pulse soaring. "You aren't mad."

"No, I'm not," I say, confirming his obvious statement. "I'm not fighting destiny, baby. But maybe you can find a way to make it up to me before the night ends."

"Guess I'll leave you two to it then," Dasha says releasing me, stumbling back to our booth.

Hunter leans in close, placing his lips at my ear again. “I can’t wait to leave my handprints on your ass, but I’m going to take your mouth first, then I want your screams.”

Without another word he wraps his large demanding hand around my elbow and drags me throughout the crowd and towards the exit. I lock eyes with a smirking Harmony and shout, “My horny fiancé wants me to perform extraordinary fellatio on him before he fucks me senseless in this dress, so I’m out!”

His lips curve up, but he doesn’t slow his pace once we’re outside. “Wait, wait, wait,” I protest, tugging on his strong arm as we pass the limo.

He pauses and looks down at me, his expression impatient and severe.

I glance back at the shiny vehicle and then into his eyes that shimmer like the darkest of sapphires. “You want to get sucked off in the back of a limo?”

Hunter scans the lot and his gaze lands on the driver who is leaning against the railing of the restaurant, smoking a cigarette and chatting on his mobile while leaning over to admire the flowerbed.

“It seems to me like he’s going to be on break for a while. At least long enough for an orgasm to occur,” I say, licking my suddenly dry lips.

“Maybe long enough for four,” he replies quietly, urging me to the limo by my elbow as if I might run if he let me go. We crawl inside the luxurious leather interior when he opens the door. As soon as my backside settles on the fine seat Hunter gives his blonde head a shake. “I want you on your knees, facing my lap.”

Breathing ruggedly, I lower myself to the carpeted floor of the limo and sit back on my heels once I'm between Hunter's legs, on my knees.

"Take me out, baby."

With deft fingers, I undo his belt buckle and pull his hard as steel erection free from his boxers.

"Kiss me," he orders, his darkened eyes leveled on me with so much intensity that his gaze has me on the verge of my own orgasm.

Bending slightly, I press my puckered lips to his tip and kiss him. He jerks in my hand and I pull back to look at him, awaiting further directions.

His eyes flare as he sinks his white teeth into his bottom lip. "Now lick and suck me. Don't stop until I tell you to."

Doing as I'm told, I lick him from his tip to his shaft, enjoying myself as I start to suck. He grunts and shifts forward in his seat, thrusting into my throat. "Fuck. That feels good." He reaches out and palms my breasts through the thin material of my dress. "Play with yourself, Isabel. Take yourself to the brink and then stop."

Gripping him tight in one hand, I let the other trail down between my thighs. Sucking earnestly, I rub my clit hard over my damp panties until my internal muscles clench for something that isn't there and my abdomen tightens. Pleasurable warmth floods me. Moaning while he's still in my mouth, I'm unable to top what my fingers are doing.

This feels out of this world good.

I need to come.

Badly.

“Stop touching yourself,” he commands harshly.

I instantly drop my hand, but not for long because I have to brace my hands on Hunter’s muscular thighs to keep myself upright as he grips two fistfuls of my hair and begins to fuck my mouth without mercy. He thrusts his thick erection down my throat so hard my eyes water. I almost gag, but I don’t because I focus on breathing through my stinging nose. “Baby, your mouth is unbelievable. I should have let you suck my dick sooner.” He wrenches my head back and looks into my eyes. “What do you think?”

I lick my lips to keep his taste inside of my mouth. “I think—”

He shoves my head back down on the long length of him, twisting his fingers in my long hair. “Changed my mind,” he says with cruel indifference that has me wetting my panties. “I don’t care what you think. Suck me harder.”

“Arrogant fucker,” I mumble, slurping like I have new Popsicle flavor I’m in love with, which I am.

He bends to brutally smack my ass with a heavy strike of his large palm. I groan out as the pain shoots straight between my legs, causing me to become wetter. My thighs are soaked with arousal.

Hunter forces my head further down on the length of him and he fucks the back of my throat. He uses me as he sees fit and although this should be wrong and degrading, it feels too right and too good to be such a sin. I’m getting off on this just as much as he is. His hands tighten in my hair and he roots himself in my throat, coming so hard I threaten to suffocate from it. I jerk back. He removes his hands from my hair, laughing

breathlessly as I watch his seed explode all over me like an uncontrolled high pressure fountain. Wet stickiness splatters across the front of my dress as I look down at myself in amused horror.

“There is no way I could have swallowed all of that.”

He gives me a lazy smile. “It looks nice on your dress like that.” He gives me a wink that sets my body ablaze. “Stay on your knees.”

Nodding, I stay where I am as Hunter lifts from the seat and repositions behind me. His swift fingers trail up the back of my heated thighs, gripping my panties.

“Put your hands behind your back,” he orders sternly, pulling the lacy material down my legs. Hunter uses my damp panties as restraints to tie my hands once I comply. He places a heavy palm on the middle of my back and shoves me against the seat until my back is nicely arched and my bare ass is lifted up to his hard stomach.

I shudder fiercely when he leans forward, placing his warm lips to the shell of my ear. He wraps his long fingers around my throat as he begins to whisper, “You’ve been a naughty girl tonight, leaving me utterly defenseless like that. I should spank your ass, huh?”

Groaning, I constantly rub up against him, wanting his strong hands on me and him inside of me.

His free hand vigorously caresses me between my legs, his fingers sliding effortlessly through my folds. He pinches my clit with his thumb and forefinger, his other digits sinking into me. His breath beats at my ear as his hand flexes on my throat, tightening.



A guttural moan leaves my lips and I come just from the feel of his powerful hand on my throat and his clever fingers between my legs.

“You know I like verbal answers, Isabel. So I’ll ask you again. I should spank your ass, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes.”

His lips skim down my cheek and he bites me on the edge of my jaw. I mewl when he removes his fingers from between my legs. “Beg me.”

“Please.”

“Please what?”

“Please spank me,” I plead earnestly, pushing against him to gain more friction.

He shoves me forward and I can’t help but whine when I lose the touch of his erection on my backside.

“Beg harder.”

“Please spank me. Please. I need your hands on me. Now. Please.” I have to suck on my bottom lip to keep from crying like a baby.

“Mm,” he hums low in my ear and I experience a mini orgasm. “Tell me why you need a spanking.”

“Because,” I pant, “I’ve been a bad girl tonight. I left you with blue balls on purpose. I’m sorry.”

A sharp pain ripples across my ass when Hunter strikes me with his palm. “No, you’re not.” He continues to supply slaps that are on the verge of harsh to my ass, but I know he’s holding his strength back. The pain is sharp but it isn’t his usual biting pain he can deliver. My backside is stinging with his handprints when he stops and lifts me by my armpits, flipping me over and sitting me on the seat. He grips my legs, urging my hips to very edge of the black leather seat.

Gasping, I lean back on my tightly fastened hands and watch as he devours me with his hungry mouth. His tongue tantalizingly part my wet folds and ruthlessly circling my clit. Tossing my head back and shutting my eyes, I squeeze my legs together, loving the sensation of his rough stubble scrapping against my thighs. He moans into me, causing the familiar warmth to pool low in my abdomen from the vibration. My entire body trembles when he intensely sucks me into his mouth. A bolt of hot-white pleasure zaps down my spine. My hips immediately lift off the seat.

He uses his hands to hold me down, his tongue dipping inside of me. “No running, my sweet. I want you still.”

I bite my lip hard, desperately trying to stifle the hysterical scream in the back of my throat. The building pleasure overwhelms me. My body bucks and writhes under his unyielding mouth. Releasing a guttural scream, I freeze. Warm fluid flows from within and me. Mortified, I keep my eyes closed. This is so embarrassing, but Hunter doesn't seem to mind because he laps at the sheen that coats my slit and both of my thighs, letting nothing go to waste.

He leans back suddenly, beginning to rub my clit furiously with his hand.

“Oh, no. Please. I can't,” I plead, feeling the muscles in my arms strain in protest and my stomach tightening.

“You can. You will,” he growls viciously. “Come. Now.”

My breath catches in my throat as wave after wave of orgasmic pleasure strikes me until my body is seized

in a haze of lethargic exertion. This doesn't deter Hunter from laying me on my belly with my knees planted on the carpeted floor of the limo. He shifts my weakened limbs to his liking, repositioning my ass until its high in the air. Hunter has me bent over the seat with my backside bare and vulnerable.

He doesn't take his time when he surges deep, thrusting so hard I blink back floating spots. "Baby, you feel too good," he whispers sinisterly in my ear, nipping my lobe hard enough it stings.

"Are you going to talk me to death or fuck me harder," I laugh breathlessly. The feel of his sleek and heated skin touching mine is perfectly wonderful. Hunter's a high that doesn't compare.

He gathers my hair in a large fistful and yanks until I wince. "My baby loves it rough." He pounds into me in a steady and deep rhythm, filling me completely and tugging my hair.

The pain spikes throughout my scalp and ripples down my body. Grunting, I close my legs to Hunter. He *tsks*, swatting my backside quite nicely. Closing my legs to him is the wrong thing to do. He simply pries them apart, pulling out only to ram back into me. I come from his powerful thrusts, feeling faint.

"Please," I whisper so low I doubt he hears me.

*I'm going to pass out.*

"My poor baby." He rains searing kisses across the back of my sensitive neck, his teeth biting down on my erratic pulse. "She can't do anything all tied and bound like this. So helpless, yet so fucking greedy." He reaches down to rub me harshly between my legs. My body stiffens and we come together. He collapses on me,

laughing deliriously. Hunter and I instantly tense. The chauffeur opens the driver's door and eases back into his seat. He is still talking on his mobile.

"...did I mention I loved my job today? Yeah. I gotta car full of hot drunk chicks to look after. It's cool, though. I mean, they're all fine as fuck."

"At least the partition is up," Hunter says.

Laughing, I nod. "Thank God for partitions."

I feel Hunter smile in my hair before he unties my hands, stuffing my panties in his jean pocket. He quickly dresses me and then himself. "We're going to run to my truck and get the fuck out of here before we both get a ticket." I nod and then we stumble out of the limo and race to his truck holding hands and laughing, smiling at one another like a couple of high school kids running from mall cops.

"Hey!" The driver shouts.

My legs are shaky and hardly able to support my weight, but I don't dare stop running. He gets inside the truck before me and has to reach over to open my door, pulling me up into the cab. I buckle my seatbelt and once the click registers we're out.

Hunter presses on the accelerator and the wind from the rolled down windows blow our hair everywhere. He grips the steering wheel tightly, grinning over at me and biting down on his lip. "I think I want to get a limo now, just so we can fuck in it."

Snorting on a laugh, I shake my head and grab a handful of messy blonde hair. I give his locks a tug and he looks at me, his twinkling blue eyes dark in the moonlight. "I love you, Hunter."

His beautiful eyes go soft, shifting back to the road. “Love you more. Always have. Always will.” He removes my hand in his hair only to bring my knuckles to his soft lips, pressing a kiss there.

I shiver in my seat, pressing my thighs together.

“We’re going to shower when we get home and sleep for the next two days. I’m exhausted,” he says, squeezing my hand and watching the road.

“Okay.”

But what he doesn’t know is that I’m going to fuck his brains out in the shower.

He delivered on his promise of four orgasms and some.

The twinkling lights of my glowing bunny ears dance across the dark glass of the window. Looking at the window, I take in my wild hair and smudge lipstick and runny mascara that streaks my face on the reflection of the glass.

I look like a hooker after a long night.

A huge smile takes over my face.

I love me some Hunter Knight.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

### *Preparing for Babies & Two Hunter's*

Isabel watches as I roll on the second layer of paint. I'm painting our children's room a soft pastel yellow while she adds the flowy white lace curtains to the windows. We decided on painting the nursery yellow because it was Isabel's mother's favorite color. Yellow is warm. Yellow reminds me of the sun.

I like yellow.

"Oh, wow. It's getting pretty in here," Charlie says, lifting his head from under the wooden cradle he's putting together. He drills in a screw and smiles over at us. "I'm proud of the both of you, you know. I'm one extremely satisfied old man, Hunter." Charlie has unofficially moved in with us. That's fine, though. He doesn't want to go back to Charlotte and I'm not going to make him.

Isabel's eyes water. "Charlie," she says thickly.

His jolly face gentles further. "The both of you will do a great job raising my great grandbabies. I have no doubt about it."

"No cookies for you, old man, if you make my woman cry," I warn, my expression playful.

Charlie smiles harder, securing the last screw. "Alright, then. Isabel, wipe those tears. No crying

women allowed.” He winks at her. “I like my cookies way too much for that.” He carefully lifts himself up, dusting his hands on his worn pants. “I’ll let you guys finish here. My back is aching. I’ve been on the floor most of the afternoon. I’m no spring chicken anymore.” With that said, he leaves.

Dropping the paint roller, I clasp Isabel’s hand in mine, pulling her out the room and down the spiral staircase to the kitchen. “Let’s take a break. Are you hungry?”

She holds on to my hand, smiling up at me, her green eyes twinkling. “Yes.”

“Hmm,” I contemplate loudly. “How about turkey and Swiss sandwiches?”

“Sounds good.”

She takes a seat on the barstool at the breakfast bar and taps her fingers idly on the granite as I pull out the ingredients for sandwiches. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“I’m listening,” I say, spreading mayo on two slices of bread.

“The Winter Ball is coming.” She pauses and blows out a nervous breath. “I want to know if you want to go with me.”

“Of course,” I answer, adding thin slices of turkey and cheese to the sandwiches. “Why was there so much hesitation to ask me?”

“I didn’t think you wanted to go. I mean, you didn’t mention it and it is November.”

“Didn’t think you wanted to go.” Placing the food on a pale green plate, I set it on the granite and slide on the stool next to her. “We can go. I’ll be happy to go

with you.” Her jade green eyes transform into a darker shade of butter toffee. I know when Isabel’s eyes darken or change color that she’s in the mood for sex and love making. I’ve grown accustomed to her insatiable desires. But I can’t give her what she wants at this moment. I must feed my pregnant fiancée. We’ve had a very busy day.

Grinning at her, I tap on her soft lips with my fingers. “Open. I need to feed you, my little hornball.”

She frowns as I hold up the sandwich to her lips, but she obediently takes a bite. “I’m not a hornball.” I make a face, my expression skeptical and she laughs, then she takes another bite. “Okay. Well if I am a hornball it’s completely your fault, Hunter. You impregnated me with not one baby, but two. And my emotions are all over the place. My body is changing, stretching. My breasts are aching and swollen. My nipples are very sore and I feel bloated all the time. I think I look like a round beach whale. But then you look at me like I’m the only girl in the world, I melt into goo. All I want to do then is to have your hands and mouth on me.”

I feed her another bite, wiping the breadcrumbs off her dusky red lips. “You really know how to make me feel good, don’t you?”

“It’s the truth,” she counters. “You make me feel good all the time. You’ve been sweet and kind to me.” Isabel searches my eyes. We stare at each other for an infinite amount of time. I break out into a smile because she’s digging for something I just don’t know what.

“Yes?” I ask, feeding the half eaten sandwich to myself.



“You’ve been sweet and kind to me,” she prompts.  
“Which means I am in a world of trouble.”

“Is it so hard to believe I’ve changed?”

“Yes. Sometimes.” She’s honest with her answer,  
and I more than like that.

“Ouch,” I tease. “Well, I have changed in certain  
aspects, Isabel. Like I said before, I’m not here to burden  
you. I’m here to support you, love you, and protect you.”

“I’m starting to get the gist of that,” she replies  
through a smile. “I might miss the unpredictable Hunter.  
He was...exciting.”

Smirking, I raise my brows. My thoughts have now  
darkened to a malevolent level I’m sure she’ll enjoy.  
“But if you’re in the mood for something more  
dangerous,” I say enticingly, “then follow me.” I rise to  
my feet, not bothering to look back.

I know she’s behind me.

Isabel follows me inside the kitchen pantry. I lean  
over her to shut the door. Lowering my eyes to hers, I  
take a step towards her. She takes a step back, her eyes  
wide and her lips parted. We do this dance until I have  
her cornered into the wall by a shelf of snacks.

“What are we doing in here?” she asks quietly.

I swiftly reach out to grip her jaw with my hand,  
squeezing her cheeks together until her lips are forced to  
pucker, then I take her mouth in a long and possessive  
kiss. My tongue darts into her mouth and claims it. She  
seems dazed when I pull back to stare into her eyes. “I’m  
thinking Charlie won’t hear your screams in here,” I say,  
gliding my hands up her thighs to pull down her panties.

She grins, leaning into me. “Hunter—”

“No, Isabel. You don’t have the right to talk right now,” I rebuke sharply. “You gave that right up when you followed me.”

Her face blanches and she shallows nervously.

I do nothing to conceal the arrogant smile on my face while I savor her fear, letting it drip from her tense body and build until it becomes thick, electrifying the still air around us. Isabel’s unease is as palpable as my touch. That evokes the twisted, sadistic side of me that I’ve kept carefully contained in a small box inside of myself. Now I’m afraid that my control has slipped and vanished into thin air while we’re in this confined space and in close proximity of each other.

I’m going to teach my fiancée a lesson on how to accept the consequences of what she asks for. I told her once that there are repercussions for her actions. Isabel may have forgotten, but I shall remind her now and refresh her memory.

She wants the perverse Hunter and the sweet Hunter.

Isabel wants it all.

I can be both men for her.

That’s a challenge I’m willing to take.

Her panicked gaze drops down to my hand as I slowly undo my belt buckle.

She gulps.

I smile.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty-one*

*Isabel age twenty*

*The heavens cry for Tyler as the mahogany casket lowers into the wet earth. Isabel's fragile body is wracked with violent sobs that shatter me completely. I stand a few feet away from her but it might as well be a million. Isabel is as far away from me as she can get.*

*She deserves better.*

*I'm going to give her better.*

*The thick grey clouds billow across the overcast sky, an ocean of teardrops falling down on me.*

*My eyes close while the heavens weep.*

\*\*\*

*I gaze out at Isabel's house through the rain streaked windshield of my truck, debating on going in. I've been sitting out here for an hour, at a loss of words.*

*What do I possibly say to her when I see her? How do I explain the years of cruelty towards her? How will she understand everything I've had to sacrifice was for her benefit?*

*I don't know if she ever will.*

*I don't know if our relationship can be salvaged.*

*But I have to try.*

*Everything that I've sacrificed would be for nothing if I don't have the courage to face her right now. My strong intuition tells me that she needs me as much as I need her. We need each other. I have to make the first move.*

*Stepping into the heavy rain, I slam my truck door and take her porch steps one at a time. A bundle of nervous set low in my belly, causing me to become a bit anxious. My limbs feel as weighty as stone. Hopefully, when I reach the door, I'll have everything I've wanted to say to Isabel in one explainable sentence.*

*But the only things that come me is how much I love her and how I would do anything in my power to protect her.*

*My heart pounds painfully inside my chest as I knock. No one answers. I knock three more times. I'm greeted with ear-shattering silence. I walk to the edge of her porch and peek around the corner to make sure her car is there. The white Lexus is parked in the lot, unmoved.*

*Isabel's home.*

*She either doesn't want to answer or something's wrong.*

*I'm going to find out.*

*It doesn't take me long to kick the knob off the door and burst through. "Isabel!" The lights are out and the furnished house is empty and shadowed in blackness, but I continue to call out her name, searching throughout the darken corridors and rooms upstairs. Isabel's room is the last one I haven't checked yet. Subconsciously, somewhere in the back of my mind I know that whatever lies beyond the barrier of her bedroom door is nothing less than tragedy that horrifying nightmares are made from. Dread infuses with my blood, pumping through my veins. The pulsing in my ears grows louder. My breath comes in fast spurts when I reach down and pull open the door.*

*Her bedroom is bathed in darkness that's too deep for any shadow to exist.*

*But there is a soft yellowing light spilling from the half closed door of her bathroom, breaking into thick obscurity. "Isabel!"*

*No answer.*

*"Isabel!" My voice is anxious, even panicked now as I take slow, indecisive steps towards the golden buttery light. I reach the door. "Isabel." I croak out her name from my dry throat. Taking a deep breath, I push the door fully open, my eyes darting to the pill bottle on the tub countertop.*

*My heart stops and my legs buckle when I witness her entire body is submerged under water; her eyes closed and her hands at her side. It's mesmerizing to watch as her dark hair sways like living seaweed around her body. She looks so peaceful, like a sleeping angel.*

*My Isabel.*

*My Dark Angel...*

*My senses return and I jump over the countertop of the tub, hurling myself into the murky water. It sloshes over and spills on the floor. Settling behind her, I lift her warm naked body up so that her back rests against my chest.*

*“Isabel.”*

*Her face is ghostly pale and her head is swaying back and forth wildly from her unconsciousness. Gripping her jaw, I force my fingers into her mouth and press down her throat. She sharply jolts forward. Hot vomit sprays out her mouth and on my legs.*

*She chokes on a sob breaking through her chest.*

*I wish I knew the exact words to speak to her, but I don't.*

*I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her securely to me, my arms like steel bands around the only girl I've loved.*

*“I'm scared,” she whimpers incoherently through her tears. “I'm scared and lonely. I'm lonely forever. I don't want to be lonely anymore. Please.” She pauses to breathe through her hiccups. “I don't want to be lonely. Please. I need someone. I need someone who loves me. No one loves me.”*

*I brush my lips across her left shoulder, wanting to declare how much I love her, how much I am in love with her.*

*Instead of saying anything, I gather her in my arms and lift her from the tub. She cries softly when I lay her on her bed. Stepping away, I find a towel to dry her off. I towel dry her beautiful hair and her fragile body. She inhales sharply and tenses when I wipe between her legs, her body going completely still.*

*“Please stop. Please. Please.”*

*Never, I want to tell her.*

*Not tonight, I tell myself, leaving her briefly to get her clothes.*

*Clutching the soft material of her cotton panties in my fisted hand, I stare at this stunning angel that has fallen from heaven’s grace. Isabel’s been through a lifetime of pain and heartache. I put her through most of it. It’s time I take care of her. It’s time I make it up to Isabel. I put her feet through the underwear, dragging them up her toned legs. She stays immobile and I need some help from her with this part.*

*“Lift your hips,” I order.*

*She continues to cry softly doing as she’s told.*

*Moving quickly, I dress her in a pair of worn jeans that hang too loosely from her boney hips and then I go back to her drawers to get her a bra and shirt. Holding her bra in my hand, I glance at her bare chest and frown. I’ve dreamed about Isabel’s breasts since I knew what breasts were, but not like this.*

*“Can you sit up?” I ask more harshly than I intended.*

*She doesn’t respond.*

*“Isabel?”*

*Her eyes are vacant as she stares at the ceiling and then she shuts them tight.*

*I would give anything to know what she’s thinking.*

*This has to be surreal for her as it is for me.*

*My weight sinks in her mattress as I sit next to her, wrapping a hand around her upper arm to drag her into my lap. I place her limp arms through the straps of her bra, hooking it together. I put on her shirt, socks, shoes,*

*and jacket. She's silent for the most part, except the tears.*

*"Please leave," Isabel murmurs, her eyes closed, her voice hoarse and raw.*

*My gaze burns into her shut eyelids for a moment.*

*Please leave?*

*I'll never leave her again.*

*Isabel is my life.*

*She doesn't know this yet.*

*But she will.*

*"No," I say, zipping the zipper of jacket and pulling the hood over her head. I cuddle her in my arms like the precious gift she is. "I'm taking you home with me."*

*"Please leave," she repeats flatly.*

*"No, Isabel. I'm not leaving you. I've done enough of that already."*

*She's mine.*

*Isabel will learn this sooner or later.*

*"Please leav—"*

*"No! Stop speaking. Just let me take care of you. Please."*

*Pressing her close to my chest, I carry her throughout the house and out into the cold rain to my truck. Isabel keeps her eyes closed shut the entire time. I strap the seatbelt over her and then slam the door. Jogging around the hood, I open the driver's door and slide in, cranking the engine.*

*All I'm thinking about is getting Isabel to my house and making her better.*

*"Please get the bear," she mumbles lowly to the window.*

*Bear?*



*What is she talking about?*

*Then it hits me.*

*There is a teddy bear floating in the tub. It must be important to her.*

*Pushing open the door, I run through the pouring rain and up to her porch. Refusing to think about Isabel's pasty colorless body submerged in dirty water only moments before, I snatch the soaked bear from the tub and toss it in a plastic grocery bag that was lying on the kitchen table and make my way back to my truck.*

*I'm fucking drenched in water and vomit and I couldn't care less.*

*I'm finally with the love of my life and I have her.*

*I'm taking her home with me.*

*Nothing will ever intervene in our relationship again.*

*Slinging the bag in her lap, I put the drive off to our new beginning.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

### *Clashing and Kissing*

My mobile phone vibrates next to the mouse pad by my computer. It's Stanley. I know why he's calling. It's late November. He wants me in New York for a signing. I've dodged him for as long as I can. I don't mind going on tour and promoting me as a household brand. It's leaving Isabel I don't like. But it's time I go to New York and get this signing over it. I mean, it is only one signing at one book store, but it's going to be one long ass day.

Pressing the phone to my ear, I answer, "Stanley."

"Hunter, my man. I've got everything in NYC ready for you. Since I've only got you for Saturday, I have a meeting planned for us with a huge director. He wants to talk about taking your book and adopting it into a script with a screenplay writer that works on all his films. We're fucking winning. I'm telling you this already. You catch your flight at eight tonight."

"But today is Thursday."

"Exactly," he replies. "By the time you get here, you'll have time to rest and relax before the big day."

"I'll have dinner with the director, but I plan to take the next year off to adjust to fatherhood and making sure Isabel is happy. So I'll do everything you ask of me on

Saturday, but in return I don't want to hear anything that involves work for an entire year. Deal?"

"You're killing me, Hunter. We have a deal, though. I know the end result will be worth it. You're my best client."

I lean back in my computer chair and smirk at the screen of my desktop. "I bet you say that to all your clients."

"Nope," he replies. "Only you. See you when you land."

"Later, Stanley."

Disconnecting, I send Isabel a text.

**Me:** Hey. Can I bring you lunch today?

**Isabel:** Yes. I'm in the mood for beef nachos with lots of sour cream and cheese. Oh, and tomatoes. Lots of diced tomatoes and shredded lettuce. Make sure the tortilla chips are very crispy. Ughhh. I'm hungry all the time now. Can you stop somewhere and get me a vanilla ice sandwich too?

**Me:** My baby's hungry. I'll get everything you want, my sweet. But we have to talk when we get there.

**Isabel:** Thanks. Okay. I love you.

**Me:** Love you more. See you soon.

An hour and a half later Isabel meets me in the cafeteria. We eat at a table in a corner by the large windows, away from other staff.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asks, chomping on nachos.

“Stanley called. I have to leave for New York tonight.”

She nods, dipping a tortilla chip in sour cream. Isabel is taking this better than I thought. She doesn't seem too bothered by it. “Will you go to Ivy's art showcase?”

My brows snap together as an unexpected wave of confusion hits me. “Ivy? I haven't spoken to Ivy in months. I didn't know she was having a showcase in New York.”

“You should go,” Isabel insist, her expression carefully masked.

“Why?”

Isabel scoops up a fork full of nachos and shrugs. “It seems like the right thing to do. You broke up with her abruptly and it's my entire fault.”

“Where is this coming from, Isabel?” I ask, stroking her knuckles with a swipe of my thumb.

She stares at her food, frowning. “I call her from time to time.”

“And you all are friends now?” I ask warily.

She shrugs again. “Something like it. It didn't feel right to leave things the way they were, so I took the initiative and called her. We've been talking for a few months now. She's so kind and extremely talented. You should go to her opening. I want you to go to her opening.”

My fiancée becoming friends with my ex is something that I wasn't anticipating to happen. This is completely throwing me off. I don't know how I'm supposed to handle a situation like this.

She entwines our hands together, staring intently into my eyes. Her expression is slightly guilty, but her gaze is tender and concerned. "I've been keeping something else from you, Hunter."

"Tell me."

"Promise you won't get angry with me first. I don't want you mad. Things escalate when you lose your temper."

I give her hand a squeeze. "I promise. Tell me, baby."

"I've been calling Blue too and I know she's your cousin," she confesses quietly. "I know everything."

The heat in my body increases, setting my temper into the danger zone. "How much do you talk to her?"

She winces, her gaze dropping down to our hands. I immediately release her when I notice I'm holding her hand too tight.

"Not often," she whispers, rubbing circulation back into her fingers. "You could have told me, Hunter."

I stare at her hand with a wave of nausea, dread and regret settling low in my abdomen. "I'm sorry about your hand. I didn't mean to hurt you." I want to avoid Blue and what Isabel has to say about her. Blue is still a subject I haven't come to terms with. I'm in the strongest part of the denial stage when it comes to Blue. I don't think I'm able to accept that she's part of my family or that I was in a relationship with my cousin, though I am

sincerely apologetic for almost breaking Isabel's small fingers.

She shrugs, completely dismissing it. "You didn't hurt me. So stop saying that. I get that Blue is a sore spot for you. I get it, Hunter. But you shouldn't be upset with her. This is a surprise for her as much as it is for you. She had no clue."

"Are you best friends with her as well?" I snap, nasty irritation leaking from my voice.

Her brows furrow and she leans back in her chair, the sudden pain in her eyes unmistakable and apparent. It's as if she got struck in the face by me. "You promised," she whispers, her voice low and cracking.

I shut my eyes close when I witness the first tear drop on her cheek. "I'm sorry. Please stop crying."

"I have to get back to work."

She's wiping her face with the backs of her hands when I open my eyes. "I'm sorry, Isabel."

"Just leave," she murmurs to her lap.

"No," I say simply. "I'm not going anywhere yet. I fucked up, baby. I'm sorry. There are going to be times where I fuck everything up and I'll need you the most then. I'll need your forgiveness. I'll need your patience. I'll need your understanding. But most of all, I'll need you. You can't get pissed and shut me out, Isabel."

"I won't," she vows solemnly, holding my leveled gaze. "But you can't go and get crazy on me, either. I'll need your forgiveness, patience, and understanding." She grips my hand, leaning over the table. I lean forward too, wanting to kiss and fuck that frown off her face. "But, I'll need you most if all."

"Give me a kiss," I say through a grin.

Her gaze darkens when they drop to my lips. “I don’t think you deserve any kisses.”

My grin turns into a full-blown smile. “I still want one.”

She leans in some more, pressing her lips to mine and smiles. “You’re a bad boy.”

“Yeah. But my Baby Mama loves me anyway,” I say, running my tongue across the seam of her sweet lips, nipping her chin.

She gasps and laughs, playfully pushing me away.

I’m persistent when I stand and slide into the chair next to her, kissing her until she blushes and squirms underneath me.

“We should end every argument with me kissing you like crazy,” I declare.

She cups the sides of my face, her thumbs stroking my cheeks. “I love you.”

“I love you more, Isabel.”

She nuzzles her nose against mine and smiles into my neck.

\*\*\*

Isabel packs my bag, carefully neatly folding every article of clothing as if she’s dreading to let it go. She frowns down at my suitcase, her brows knitted together.

Sitting beside her on the bed, I reach up and smooth the deep wrinkles between her eyebrows.

“My baby doesn’t want me to go,” I say, wrapping my arms around her.

“I don’t want to be apart from you,” Isabel mumbles into my chest.

“Hmm,” I hum out loud, gently patting her ass.

“Why don’t you come with me? Would you like that?”

Her eyes expand when she peers up at me. “Yes. You’d let me go?”

“Of course. I’ll always want you with me.”

Her brilliant smile spreads from ear to ear. “Okay. I have to call work, like, right now and then I have to pack.”

“How about I pack while you call work?” I counter.

“Deal,” she shrills, jumping up from my lap and racing to her phone on the dresser.

New York here we come.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

*New York*

Isabel presses her hand against the spotless floor-to-ceiling glass window of our penthouse hotel. Moving behind her, I coil my arms around her waist and hug her to me. She's warm and smells intoxicating. It should be a crime how high I get when I'm around her.

She leans into me while we gaze at the busy city that never sleeps. The pedestrians strolling along the sidewalks appear like specks of dark color from up here. The long lanes of traffic are streaks of fading red and yellow. The energy is electric, even when the sun is asleep and the sky is inked with black.

Nuzzling my lips against her neck, I breathe in her scent and close my eyes from the headiness of having Isabel with me. The media were rowdy when we landed. The photographers were in a wild frenzy, pushing and shoving each other as they snapped our pictures while we made our way from the airport into the waiting SUV by the curb that takes us straight to our hotel. I held Isabel's hand tightly in mine, in fear she would get scared. But she didn't. She surprised me. Isabel smiled at them and gave a polite wave before we entered the dark SUV. They fucking loved it, in return loved her.

“We’re going to be splattered on every gossip magazine within the next few hours,” I tell her in her ear.

“I know. I didn’t know the extent of your popularity, Mr. Celebrity.”

“I think you have it backwards. Everyone loves you more.” I kiss her cheek, loving dotting on Isabel. “You won everyone over with a smile and a wave. How the hell do you do that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, because I have no idea,” she laughs.

“You want to go out to dinner or rest?”

“Neither,” she replies. Isabel turns in my arms, glancing at the massive bed behind us. “I want my handsome fiancé to make love to me.”

A grin takes over my face as my hand travels to her jeans, unbuttoning them. My hand cups her between her legs and she gasps, shuddering. Hooking her panties to the side, I slide my finger into her hot pussy.

She’s soaked.

“When are you not wet?” I sneer with false irritation, staring down at her.

She shrugs unconcernedly, laughing as I carry her to the huge mattress.

We spend the night in bed.

I fuck Isabel hard.

After that I take my time making love to her, drawing out her whimpers and moans and saving her screams for last.

Then we order room service and eat until we’re comatose.

This isn’t a bad way to spend Friday night in NYC.

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The line is out the door and around a few blocks for the signing for *Sweet*. I chose a small intimate library that isn't as popular as the major ones, but that doesn't matter when Stanley put the word out. Leave it to Stanley and his excellent PR team to make any occasion grand. I sign hundreds of books and took countless pictures. By the end of the night my wrist is sore and my cheeks feel a bit swollen from all the smiling, but I loved every second with my readers. They are the ones who make what I do so interesting and worth all the headache and heartache I go through putting words on paper, making them come alive.

After the signing Stanley takes me straight to dinner. He doesn't grant me a second to call and check on Isabel. She's probably in the hotel room, waiting to go sightseeing with me. But knowing Isabel, she's making unlikely friends already.

The restaurant is beyond luxurious with its shimmering crystal chandeliers, gold trimmed plates and high-spine leather menus. We have two waiters patiently waiting to take care of anything we may need. I fidget in my seat as Stanley negotiates with Miles Oliver, the big time director he was going on and on about. I've heard of him. He's from a small town like me and has three other brothers. Miles brought his sister-in-law, December, to dinner with us because she refuses to die of boredom at their hotel. Those are her words, not mine. She's nice enough, though she has a sharp tongue as

severe as the thick bangs that lie across her forehead. She has the deepest brown eyes I've ever seen. Purely mocha brown. December is exotic like Isabel. Her hair is long and deep black but her skin is the color of rich caramel. She wrinkles her nose when I aim my smile at her.

"I'm not interested," she mumbles to me as she sips at her cocktail.

"I'm not, either," I reply amused, staring at her. "You seem to think highly of yourself."

"And you seem like you can be a dickhead," December says low enough for my ears only.

I give her another smile, but it must not be a friendly one because she shivers from it. She stares at me with her unfathomable brown eyes, her expression thoughtful.

Stanley and Miles aren't aware of our conversation going on. They're all business here. I'm just an able body that's accounted for.

"Stanley, December and I are going to the bar. It was nice meeting you, Miles. I look forward to working with you." I shake Miles's hand and hook my arm through December's, walking to the polished bar.

"Behave, December. Please," Oliver begs and his expression is desperate.

"I will," she yells over her shoulder.

"Can I have two shots of whisky and whatever he wants," December mutters to the bartender, dismissively waving her hand to me.

The dark-haired bartender turns to me. "What would you like, sir?"

"Nothing for me, thank you."

December lifts a brow. “You’re not drinking tonight?”

“I don’t drink at all.”

She gazes at the various bottles that gleam with liquor behind the bar. “Then why are we at the bar?”

“Because you looked like you needed a drink.”

“You’re smart man,” she says, tossing back her shots of whisky. She scrunches up her face and blinks rapidly. “My good sir, can I have two more?”

“Right on it.”

“So do you love her?”

“Love who?” I ask, gazing at the three platinum rings glinting in the light on my thumb.

She rolls her eyes as if the question should be obvious. “Isabel.”

“More than she’ll ever know.”

“I hate you,” she states, throwing back two more shots.

“What’s his name?”

Her brows pull together and she swings her deep chocolate brown eyes to me. “Who’s name?”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “The guy that has you taking shots like you’re trying to win a race.”

“Fucking Danny,” she snarls into her shot glass.

“Can I have a shot of cranberry juice?”

The bartender nods while he tends to other customers. “Sure thing.”

I raise my glass against hers. “To Fucking Danny.”

“Fuck Danny,” she replies as we clink our glasses in a cheers.

A muscular man in military fatigues appears from around the corner and settles on to a stool next to

December. He has similar features as Miles. The only difference is that this guy's a little older and he seems like he has something brutal just underneath the surface of his everyday skin. This man's face is severe and detached, but when his eyes land on December warmth contorts his expression. I clock him before December does and I know instantly that this is Fucking Danny.

He clamps his fingers on her small elbow. She tries to shake him off without looking at who's next to her.

He doesn't budge.

"Excuse me, but fuck off," she finally says.

"Not a chance," he replies in a low rumble.

It's fascinating as I watch her eyes expand and her lips part in shock and wonder. "Danny."

Grinning, I nod to Danny. He lifts his chin and I excuse myself, leaving them at the bar. Both men are smiling when I approach the table, which can only mean good things.

"We have a deal, Hunter. A perfect deal. This is going to be good for all of us." Stanley smiles and winks at me. "Just you wait."

"Making Sweet come alive on the big screen will be a great challenge I look forward to, Hunter," Oliver says, pushing to his feet. He shakes both of our hands. "We'll be in touch gentlemen, but if you'll excuse me, I have a wife and kid to get back to."

We watch Oliver stop at the bar by his brother and sister-in-law. He says something to his brother and playfully shoves December's head before he leaves out the restaurant.

“Hunter, stay and celebrate with me,” Stanley says, drinking from his champagne flute. “We made the best deal in history.”

“Another time.” I shrug on my black overcoat. “I promised Isabel sightseeing before we left.”

He lifts his flute to me, nodding absently. Stanley is already buzzing. “New York tourist never gets old. Go and do mundane things, you simpleton.”

“Will do.”

Isabel is standing at the door when I come through it. Her eyes are wide, her expression almost panicked. “What’s the matter?”

“Can we leave now? Falcon has his private jet already waiting for us.”

My gaze drops down and I notice our luggage packed at her sides. I reach for her immediately, pressing her into my chest. “What happened?”

She trembles in my arms, nestling closer to me. “It’s nothing. I’m ready to leave. I want to go home. Please.”

“Baby, calm down,” I order, holding her beautiful face in my hands. Looking into her smoky emerald watery eyes I know something isn’t right. “What happened when I left? Did someone hurt you, Isabel?”

She struggles with a sob that breaks through her chest. She leans fully into me, fisting her hands tight in my coat. “Please. Let’s go home. Please, Hunter. *Please.*”

“Okay.” I hug her harder. “We’ll go home.”

Isabel is very quiet when we’re seated on the jet. She stares out the small round window, staring down at the tarmac, her knees bouncing up and down impatiently and anxiously.

I don't know what went wrong but I will find out.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty-one*

*Isabel age twenty*

*“I have the tape,” Max says, his eyes flashing something fierce but controlled.*

*“Great. Where is it?” I ask, annoyed that he doesn’t seem like he wants me to see it.*

*“Safe. It’s on its way to the Chief’s office. He will take care of everything.”*

*Gritting my teeth, I force myself to breathe through my nose.*

*Inhale.*

*Exhale.*

*Doing this keeps everything in focus for me. Otherwise, my fist would be in Max’s face right now.*

*“Well, we have to keep Isabel safe until your team handles it. Isabel is my first priority.”*

*Max’s dark brows furrow, his forehead creasing with skepticism contorting his features. “Is she, though?”*

*His words are like a blow to the chest.*

*It hurts everywhere.*

*How could he ask that?*

*How dare he ask that?*

*Clenching my fists, I pop my knuckles and breathe deeply. "Isabel comes first with everything I do. I love her. I love more than she knows. I love Isabel more than you ever could."*

*His mouth twists with barely contained disgust. He knows Isabel would choose me over him any day. I win when it comes to her heart. "I have to go. Isabel is waiting for me." He gives me a look, his lip curling back in anger. "And I would never keep Isabel waiting." Max jumps into his SUV and drives off.*

*Exhaling, I allow my stiff fingers and tight jaw to relax. The double meaning in his sentence echoes numbly in my head.*

*Keeping Isabel waiting is a sacrifice I had to make.*

*Everything has been for her.*

*Everything will be for her.*

*Shaking off the dark guilt, I walk back inside my house and up to my room to finish getting dressed for the Winter Ball. Candy sits in front of the mirror, taking rollers out of her ruby-red hair. Her flaming curls fall down her shoulders in abundance. Just for the briefest of moments, I close my eyes and imagine Isabel in her place. Deep black curls cascading down her shoulders instead of red. Glittering smoky emerald eyes instead of pale green. My heart splits from sadness and longing.*

*Warm hands cup my face, stroking my cheeks. "Are you ready?"*

*"Yes," I squeeze from a constricted throat.*

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*Candy and I skip the red carpet. We go straight into the side double glass doors of the hotel. My steps slow and then stop abruptly when we enter the ballroom. My eyes immediately dart to Isabel in her elegant white gown.*

*She fills my vision.*

*Her beauty blinds me.*

*She looks like a winter angel.*

*She looks like a fallen shimmering snowflake.*

*How badly I wish I could hold her.*

*She grips the back of her neck and suddenly looks back at me. We hold each other's gaze for a brief eternity. I stare at her intently, as if I can translate how much I love her into my gaze alone. Isabel breaths deeply, gripping the edges of the table like she can feel me casting my steal cable cord lasso of love around her, drawing her to me, tying her to me forever. Our connection is undeniable. Isabel can feel me.*

*Candy nuzzles into me, smiling up at me.*

*Giving her my attention, I sweep her hair behind her ear. Throwing my arm around her, I lead her to the table on the other side of the room away from Isabel. Isabel clouds my mind. She doesn't need me. I'm not good enough for her.*

*"Do you want to dance?" Candy asks, her tone light as if excepting rejection.*

*"Sure," I say, holding out my hand to help her from her chair. "Let's dance."*

*We dance and dance to the live band. I spin her in circles. Candy giggles breathlessly, falling into my arms. It's not fair to her that I wish Isabel was the one I was*

*spinning until she's giggling and falling into my arms like a helpless damsel.*

*Taylor in her pretty dress comes towards us. Her eyes are pained when she approaches me. "Can I talk to you alone, Hunter?"*

*"Yeah," I say, frowning at her. "Candy, I have to go."*

*She gives me an understanding nod. "Be safe."*

*"You too," I say, touching her cheek. "Call me when you get home."*

*"Okay."*

*"We have to hurry," Taylor says, grabbing my arm and running down the halls. "I know you know everything. Tyler told me that he told you. I told Isabel about her sister, Naya and my mother Lily. She freaked out bad. But Rex has just told me that he thinks his father wants Isabel dead. You have to get her away from their dad. Max is clueless and Rex is frightened of Omar. Omar also altered the tape and made it seem like you pushed Tyler off The Suicide Bridge when he did. He murdered Tyler." Taylor brings me to a small storage room and then unlocks it with a keycard. We step inside and Isabel is curled in the corner.*

*"Her mother left her two letters Tyler found. She left two letters. I don't think Isabel is strong enough to read them."*

*"Give them to me. I'll give them to her when she's ready."*

*Taylor takes the letters from her silvery rainbow clutch and hands them to me. "Rex told me that Max has the tape. What are you going to do?"*

*“Let her make the decision.” I’ll leave it up to Isabel to make the next move, but it’s going to kill me if she thinks I’m capable of murdering Tyler.*

*Taylor shakes her head. “I think you should take her home with you. She doesn’t look good.”*

*“Where are you going?”*

*Her mobile vibrates. She glances down at it and frowns. “It’s Rex. We’re leaving town. I’ve had enough of Cherry Creek for a lifetime. I’m searching for my mother. I have clues and I’m going to follow them. Rex wants to help...he’s afraid of Him.”*

*“Okay...”—I take deep breath and accept what I have to do—“Right. Leave as soon as you can.”*

*“Keep her safe, Hunter. She’s the only family I have left.”*

*“I got her, Taylor. She’s going to be fine.”*

*She bites her lip, unsure. “I just don’t want to leave her here like this. It doesn’t feel right.”*

*“Go, Taylor. You don’t have a choice.”*

*Taylor crouches and holds Isabel’s hand. “Isabel, stay strong. Breathe, even when you feel like it’s impossible. We will see each other again.” She kisses Isabel on the cheek. My heart hurts for both of them as I watch Taylor run off.*

*I look at Isabel on the floor, balled tight within herself and get furious. “Isabel, I’m getting you out of here.” Picking her up, I cradle her close to my chest and carry her out the room, exiting the hotel.*

*I’m three feet away from my truck when she whispers, “Put me down.”*

*“No.”*

*My ears ring when her screeching voice shouts,  
“PUT ME DOWN!”*

*I freeze instantly because I recognize the sheer  
terror in her trembling tone. She wobbles when I drop  
her to her feet. Reaching out I try to balance her, but she  
shoves me away and leans against my truck door. I feel  
her eyes burning holes into my skull, but I can't focus on  
her anger at this moment. My gaze goes beyond her.  
Max is coming out the hotel, heading straight for us. I  
have to get Isabel away from him. Max's cluelessness  
can get Isabel killed.*

*“We have to get out of here, Isabel.”*

*“Max has the tape.”*

*I squint into the distance as Max whispers  
something to an officer on standby. “Yeah, we have to  
leave. Now.”*

*“No,” she says firmly.*

*My gaze drifts down to her panicked eyes. The  
horror in Isabel's eyes pisses me off. She doesn't get that  
I'm trying to help her. I need to get her inside my truck  
and far from Cherry Creek and Omar. She's being  
stubborn. “No?”*

*“Yes. No. I'm not going anywhere until I see that  
tape.”*

*The frustration is boiling inside of me. “Look,”—I  
clench my jaw unable to cool my temper—“we are  
leaving right now, even if I have to drag you by your  
damn hair.”*

*“I'll scream,” she warns quietly.*

*Suddenly, I'm in her face, my shadow large enough  
to eclipse the sun and swallow her little frame. Isabel  
trembles in my menacing presence. How badly I want to*

*tell her that I wouldn't harm her for anything in the world, but it's much too late for that.*

*"I don't care. I'm fast."*

*Her entire face frowns, the glittering tears brimming her eyes. "Why are you doing this, Hunter? Max has the tape. Why can't I just see it?"*

*"Don't make this more difficult than it has to be," I say, opening the passenger door and grab her upper arm, physically moving her into the vehicle. I need her in my truck, so we can leave. I need to get her into safety.*

*Isabel narrows her eyes on my face, scrutinizing my impassive expression. "Why can't I see the tape, Hunter? What's on the video?"*

*I pull on her arm, giving it a sharp yank.*

*"Ow. You're hurting me, Hunter. Stop!"*

*A river of tears floods her face. I'll take her tears if I can get her to a safe place and out of sight. She doesn't move, so I give her a harsh jerk. As much as it rips my heart apart to be cruel to her, it is necessary. I've been cruel to her for many years now and at least she's still breathing. My cruelty may have spared her life in the past, but I highly doubt it will work this time.*

*Isabel's hurting.*

*I hurt too.*

*I've been suffering for so long now. Only when she's smiling do I feel any relief. My heart gets heavy.*

*"FUCK! Why are you making this so fucking difficult?"*

*She pales and then screams, "HELP ME! HE'S HURTING ME! HELP ME! PLEASE! MAX! MAX!"*

*Her high-pitched screams pierce my eardrums and my heart stops. She's calling for Max. Max of all people.*

*Max never sacrificed a third of the things I have for Isabel. Max will never have to sacrifice what I did.*

*A group of men slam me to the ground. They have my hands wrenched behind my back and my face is smashed to the pavement. The wet asphalt is scrapping my cheek. I gaze up at Isabel. My heart plummets to my stomach. This is the point of no retreat for us. I've overstepped my boundaries for the last time with Isabel. I can tell with the satisfied but miserable look in her watery eyes.*

*I don't care if she thinks I've gone too far.*

*In fact, I have gone too far to give up on us now.*

*"It's an illusion, Isabel. Everything is an illusion," I say, attempting to salvage any emotion Isabel has left for me.*

*"Illusion: a false mental image produced by misinterpretation of things that actually exist. I don't think I'm misinterpreting anything, Hunter. I see everything."*

*How wrong she is.*

*Everything has been an illusion.*

*My hate for her is an illusion.*

*Pretending that I've moved on is an illusion.*

*Pretending I can let her go is an illusion.*

*Isabel sees nothing.*

*"That's it: you don't think much. You don't see much. Blinded first by the beauty that killed her. Invisible. Someday you'll fall in love with me. I need you to see with your heart, Isabel. What does your heart tell you?"*

*She takes an unsteady step back as if I struck her. She doesn't fully recognize her own confession. But she*



*understands faintly that those words resonate within her soul that I'm trying to touch. Max holds her steady. My pain is reflected in her eyes. And that's how I know we'll forever be connected, that our bond is truly unbreakable. As much as Isabel dislikes our attachment to each other, our link is eternal.*

*Isabel stares at me and I feel our link tighten right before she loosens it a lifetime length.*

*What does your heart tell you, Isabel?*

*We belong together.*

*"That I love you enough to finally let you go. Goodbye, Hunter Knight." She turns sharply, moving in the direction of Max's SUV.*

*The most important part of me walks away.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

### *All for You*

As soon as we step into the house Isabel jolts down the hall and runs straight into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Tossing my keys on the island countertop, I walk to the bathroom and rest my forehead on the closed door, wishing I knew what has her upset.

“Talk to me, Isabel.”

“Hunter, I can’t,” she pleads in a strained tearful voice that hurts my heart.

A wave of sheer dread and fear washes over me. I have to swallow with effort before I speak. “Baby, please. I need you to talk to me.”

“I can’t, Hunter. I can’t...” she trails off lost in her tears.

With a shaky hand, I reach for the knob and twist, but it’s locked. “Baby, let me in please. Whatever it is, I promise that we’ll get through this.” I bang my forehead against the door and squeeze my eyes shut. “Forever, Isabel.”

There’s a pause before she asks, “Forever, Hunter?”  
“Forever, Isabel.”

With that said, she unlocks the door and opens it. My eyes dart to her jeans that are pooled around her ankles and up to her frightened eyes that leak, a small clear stream running down both her cheeks.

She looks down at her outreached hand she holds up to my face. My gaze drops down and I wish I hadn't looked at all. Bright red stains her trembling fingers. Grabbing her hand, I wipe it clean on my coat and pull her in for a hug. She cries in my chest as I hold her.

"I've been bleeding since New York," confesses quietly.

"We have to get you to the hospital." My voice is hoarse, and very very weak.

"No," she protests in a definite tone. "I'm terrified. I don't want to go. I can't go." She inhales through her nose, sniffing. "What if I lost the babies..." she shudders violently.

"Don't talk like that, Isabel. You're fine. We're fine. But we have to go to the hospital. You're bleeding and I won't lose you because of this."

"But I wanted the babies for you, Hunter. I wanted to be a mom for you. I wanted you to be a father. I wanted everything for you, Hunter. All of this was for you. You deserved to be a father. You deserve the best, Hunter. You deserve the world."

"Give that then and let me take you to get checked out."

She conceals her face in my coat, nodding. "Okay. For you."

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Isabel lies back on the examination table, the roll of crepe paper underneath her crackling with each anxious movement. She looks extremely defenseless and vulnerable in the pale blue exam gown. Feeling defeated, I hold her hand tight in mine while I stand at her side, prepared to hear the worst news of my life.

Dr. Marvin knocks on the door before entering. “I’ve heard you’ve been bleeding. Let’s take a look at the babies, lovely.” He sits on his rolling stool and puts on his gloves, then opens her gown, squeezing jelly on her small rounded tummy. He moves the scanner across the skin on her abdomen and the first thing we hear are the strong heartbeats that pulse loud and clear in our ears. The sound is one of relief. I can almost breathe again.

“Look at the screen here.” He points to the ultrasound picture moving. “Look at the babies. They are unharmed and developing normally for six months. Mommy’s just having a bit of spotting. I’m going to draw blood and run some tests to make sure. But you seem absolutely fine.”

“What if I lose them?” Isabel asks horrified.

Dr. Marvin shakes his head. “Listen, your body knows what to do. You were born to do this, Isabel. Trust that. There’s no need to worry about this process. In mid February you’re going to give birth to two wonderful babies. You can worry after they arrive. That’s what most mothers tend to do, anyway.”

“They’re healthy?” I ask, my voice cracking.

He nods. “Yes, they are doing well. Her blood pressure is good. I’m going to take some blood to be on the safe side.”

Thank Christ my family is okay.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

### *Family Reunion*

“I have to come clean about something,” Isabel says through a mouthful of cheeseburger.

Tilting my head to the side, I stare at her, bemused. “All ears.”

She looks at me, her expression unreadable. Her gaze drops down to my burger and up to me again. She frowns. “Take another bite of your burger first.”

Complying, I stuff my mouth full of grilled meat and bread, chewing slowly as I scrutinize her face.

What is she hiding this time?

“Now that your mouth is too full to say anything, I can confess,”—the words begin to flow and she starts to talk very fast, so fast that I have to concentrate on everything she says— “that I told Ivy about the bleeding and she’s five minutes away. Blue is also with her. They’re spending the night.”

My eyes narrow on her full heart-shaped lips. “You invited them to spend the night with us?”

Her lips press together as she nods. “Are you upset?”

“I wish you would have told me before hand,” I reply, shrugging uncaringly. “At least you told me before they arrived.” I aim my malevolent smile towards her

and she shivers. “Though, I can’t tell you I won’t be upset when I fuck you. In fact, I can guarantee that I’ll be furious.” I can take my frustrations out on Isabel when I’m between her legs.

Her olive-green eyes darken into liquid gold.

“Hunter,” she breathes.

“Yes?” I answer, my thumb running over her plump bottom lip.

“I don’t know—”

The doorbell rings. Lifting myself up, I rise from our comfortable picnic on the couch and answer the door. I stare down at two pairs of colorful rainbow boots.

“Hey, Hunter.”

My gaze swings to Ivy’s gentle eyes and soft smile.

“Hey, Ivy.”

“Hunter,” Blue greets simply, smashing her cigarette against the shutters of my porch.

I give my head a slight nod in acknowledgment.

“Blue.” I’m unable to stop staring at them in their black windbreaker coats. The heavy rain pouring from the moody grey sky is their background, depicting what I’m currently feeling.

Opening the door wider, I grin at them. “Come in and out of the rain.”

They huddle through the door and Isabel embraces them in tight hug. “I’m glad you guys made the trip down.”

“Are you okay?” Ivy asks.

“Hunter has super sperm, so I’m sure nothing can harm those little ones,” Blue says.

Ivy offers me an apologetic look. “Sorry. Blue will be Blue.”

“Blue will be Blue,” I agree. “How’s life been?”

They both shrug off their coats and shoes, slipping easily into the old habit of making themselves comfortable and at home.

“Life has been good,” Ivy answers as she settles into the couch next Isabel while Blue strolls into the kitchen and raids the refrigerator and cabinets. “I’ve been creative lately. Inspiration has been flowing right out of me.”

“I’m starved. I want brownies,” Blue shouts into the living room, shaking a can of cocoa.

“Duty calls,” Isabel sighs, rising to her feet. She looks at Ivy and then at me and smiles with a gleam in her eye I can’t decipher. But Isabel couldn’t be more obvious of her intentions with leaving me and Ivy alone to gain some kind of closure. I don’t understand why she would want us to get closure. Ivy and Isabel shouldn’t be on good terms with one another. Sally has taught me females never get along when it comes to a man. I guess Sally was way off because Isabel and Ivy are.

They’re friends.

Not enemies, wishing to rip each other apart and sprinkle the scraps in ill animosity.

This is going to take a while to get used to.

Sitting back in a cushiony armchair next to the couch, I keep my gaze locked on Ivy. She rubs her palms on her faded jeans, her long hair waving out over her tie-dye shirt. Her thick hair is damp from the rain. The tips are still teal blue. She doesn’t meet my eyes. Ivy keeps her gaze on a fixed spot between her feet. And that’s when I notice that I’ve marked her.

“Ivy.”



“Hmm?” She answers without looking at me.

“Ivy, look at me,”—pausing, I test the word please in my head, deciding I should use it in this instance—“please.”

She hesitantly lifts her guarded gaze to mine. When Ivy and I were in our chaotic relationship, I never treated her as my equal. I never gave her the respect she needed. I didn’t treat her with care. And I certainly never said *please*. I can see how I scarred her.

I am her Sally.

“I’m sorry, Ivy,” I say genuinely. “I marked you and I’m sorry.”

She clenches her jaw and nods.

“Do you believe me?”

“I do,” she says quietly, picking at her silver nail polish. “But there’s something you don’t get about me. I *liked* getting marked by you. I loved it.”

“Ivy, if people knew how I treated you,”—I give my head a shake, displeased with the way this conversation is going—“they would want me publicly crucified.”

“Whatever we did isn’t anyone’s business, Hunter. It’s ours. I loved how you marked me, so you’re just going have to get over it.”

“You shouldn’t love it. I could have harmed you. It could have been much worse than emotionally scarring you for life. I could have ended your life, if I was any less careless with you.”

“I have rape fantasies daily, Hunter,” she says in dismissive tone, as if I asked her what brand of toothpaste she uses. “What you did was harmless. Besides, you have nothing on Blue,”—she flushes dark red, smiling a secret smile that says so much—“she can

wield a single tail whip like I wield a paintbrush. So stop torturing yourself. I'm fine. But the thing is...can Isabel take the worst of what you are. I mean, no offense, she seems delicate in many ways and you can get brutal when you have a mind for it."

We hold each other's gaze, a fleeting moment of how good of a distraction Ivy was passes. A massive smile takes over my features and she shudders. Ivy has no idea that Isabel has already survived the worst of who I am. Isabel thrived in the darkness when I eclipsed the sun and she's still here with me when she could have me behind bars for most of my life. Instead, she's have my fucking baby.

"Isabel can handle herself quite nicely," I say, sitting back in the arm chair.

"Well, that's good."

"I suppose it is." I give her another smile because I can't seem stop.

She stares at me and shakes whatever emotions that suddenly washes over her. "Will Charlie join us? Blue has missed him terribly. We both have."

"He should be back within the next half hour. He's at the bar. You know how much he likes to drink."

There's a heavy knock on the front door. Pushing to my feet, I answer it.

"The crew is here," Victor announces, coming through with a plastic container of sewing supplies in his hand and a leather satchel over his shoulder. "I have to get started on Isabel's Winter Ball gown if it's going to be ready in time."

“Why is Cherry Creek weather always gloomy?” Harmony asks, cuddling her sleeping baby close to her chest. “The sun is never out.”

“Who knows,” Falcon replies, coming in after Harmony. He’s carrying a long brown box in his hands. It’s an artificial Christmas tree from the picture posted outside of the box. He sets it in the corner of the living room and begins to assemble it.

Closing the door to the sad and crying sky, I take in the people who have become like family. Vic drapes a measuring tape across Isabel’s waist and laughs at something she says. Isabel holds a silver mixing bowl in her arms, stirring happily while Blue sits on the countertop with her legs crossed and nods to whatever Isabel is saying. Harmony and Ivy converse quietly on the couch as Ivy holds little sleeping, Ruby, in her arms. Falcon takes the remote and changes the channel to a football game.

“Need help?” I ask.

“Sure do,” Falcon answers, passing the directions to me. “The print is way too small for me to read. You read while I put the puzzle together. By the way, do you have any beer? I’m going need a beer, wings and something greasy because my team is losing.”

“This is a dry house when we don’t have any guests.”

“I’ll go get beer and pizza and wings,” Blue interjects. She gives me an easy smile. “I need car keys, so American boys can devour their American meat.”

“On the breakfast bar,” I say through a grin.

“Go to Jeff’s Pizzeria,” Falcon calls out. “And tell them Falcon sent you. You won’t have to wait as long.”

She nods as she puts on her rains boots and coat. Then she snatches my truck keys. “Be back soon.”

I end up putting the entire blue spruce tree together without reading the directions, which is an achievement being that I never got a chance to put up a Christmas tree before. Grace wasn't the festive type of mother. Falcon is stuck on the couch, unable to move due to the devastating score of his losing team. By the time Charlie and Blue arrive, Isabel's pan of brownies is mostly eaten.

Everyone flecks into the living room. Blue orbits around Charlie, who slouches next to Falcon on the couch with a beer in hand and Blue on his lap. Harmony breastfeeds her little one while she compliments me on my book to movie news as I untangle a row of twinkling lights, wrapping them around the tree. Ivy and Isabel decorate the spruce with colorful ball and shimmering snowflakes ornaments. Isabel has been collecting Christmas ornaments in her free time. She has divulged this when I asked her where the box of ornaments came from.

Everyone adds candy canes, hanging the red and white stripped candy on every branch.

“All we need is to put the Christmas star up high now, so the angels can see it,” Isabel says. “I need a ladder.”

“You don't need a ladder when you have me,” I say, bending slightly so she can hop on me. “C'mon. I'll be your ladder. Jump on my shoulders.”

“Are sure? I've gotten heavy.”

“Isabel, get on. I'm stronger.”

“Okay,” she says warily. She lowers herself onto me, my head is between her legs and her legs are dangling over my shoulders. I carefully lift up and steady her as she puts the golden star on the highest point of the tree.

“It’s so pretty,” she says, leaning into me while we admire the decorative, ornate tree. The blue, red, green and yellow glittering lights flash a cheerful dance as happy as Christmas itself.

“Yeah, it is,” I reply, hooking an arm around her and pressing my lips to her forehead.

Isabel grabs her camera off the coffee table. “Let’s take a group picture.”

Everyone huddles together in front of the massive sparkling Christmas tree while Isabel sets the timer and places the camera on the tripod. She joins the group, snuggling up to my left side and smiles hugely.

Taking in the sounds of laughter along with the scent of coco and peppermints, it dawns on me that I have never felt this full.

So complete.

I look down at the love of my life and when she aims her beautiful eyes and bright smile at me, I realize I’m not only full, I’m bursting.

## CHAPTER SIXTY

### *The Past*

*Hunter age twenty-one*

*Isabel age twenty*

*Taylor and Rex sit tensely on the edge of my couch, while I pace the living room floor. I look down at my phone in my hand and clutch my fist until it bleeds. Omar sent a picture of Isabel passed out in the cage my mother spent years torturing me in. She's defenseless in her Cinderella white gown and hunched over. He sent that picture to my phone with four words.*

*Come Alone.*

*No weapons.*

*"I have to go to her. We're wasting time." My gaze flickers to Rex. He stares down at my gun in his shaking hands and swallows hard. "Rex, you have to be brave. I need you to come in five minutes after I go in. You don't have to kill your father, Rex. I need you to debilitate him. When you shoot, aim for his knees or anywhere below his waist. I need him weakened. Do you understand?"*

*He nods slightly. "Yeah. It still sucks that this is even going on. God, he could be hacking away at Max and Isabel now."*

*“Don’t think like that, Rex,” Taylor says, with a determined absolute. “Think about Max and Isabel alive and how happy they’ll be once this whole thing is over.”*

*“I’m going,” I declare, snatching my truck keys off the table. “Isabel isn’t going to lose a fucking hair in this process. Have a steady hand, Rex. I believe in you.” Without turning back, I run to my truck and press the accelerator, speeding through the dark woods.*

*I can’t keep Isabel waiting.*

*I didn’t come this far to have her dead because of me.*

*I will save Isabel.*

*I will make sure she’s breathing in my arms when this passes.*

*Miles and miles of dark road stretch in my rearview mirrors until I’m park in front of the enormous southern Victorian house shadowed pale grey in the light of the moon. I’m greeted by its mammoth black spiky wrought-iron gates that are here to keep something in rather than something out.*

*Breathing ruggedly, I force my heavy limbs to move around the house to the back of the wooded area where my worst nightmares have played out. Vomit burns the back of my throat when the rustic barn’s shadow looms over me like a warning before it snatches my soul out.*

*Gathering all my courage, I push through the door and my eyes go straight to Isabel. She looks too beautiful to be in this type of situation. She’s a snowflake tossed in the lake of fire. I’m a boy of fire that could never love the girl of ice.*

*“Glad to know you followed directions,” Omar says too close for comfort.*

*I'm so engrossed in Isabel that I never hear him creep behind me.*

*Excruciating pain explodes in the back of my skull. My knees buckle and I collapse to the ground.*

*No.*

*It can't end like this.*

*It just can't...*

*Blackness.*

\*\*\*

*Someone touches my face. This touch is not a loving touch. It's an assessing touch. Why is someone touching my face? Where am I?*

*I shake my head to clear it and groan out in pain. It hurts. It throbs in a fast tempo that has my brain seized. The pain is sharp and biting, but the burn is far worse. Blinking back against the darkness, I try to fight the sleep that wants to claim me.*

*"Wake, my boy," a masculine voice demands.*

*My eyelids close and my head falls.*

*Someone strikes my cheek. The aching sting spreads, causing my eyes to water. "I said wake, Hunter. Isabel needs you now."*

*Panic sets in, pumping adrenaline through my veins. My eyes fly open, my senses returning. But I can't move. My arms are bound and my legs are tied to the chair. He has me gagged with a rag, the duct tape slapped across my mouth. Another chair is back to back with mine. Turning my head slightly, I notice Max tied in the exact*



*why. But he's bleeding from his temple and he is completely out of it.*

*I can't speak.*

*I can't move.*

*I pray to God that Rex interferes.*

*My jaw tenses as Omar smiles down at me. "It's time, Hunter. It will be interesting to see how this plays out." He picks up a white bucket off the ground and dumps it over Isabel. She jolts awake, gasping for breath.*

*He whispers something to her too low for me to hear.*

*The pounding in my head has my attention divided, but I'm extremely focused on Isabel when her green-hazel eyes are centered on me. I don't listen to anything Omar says, and I wish Isabel doesn't either. But I can tell she does from the misery in her pretty eyes. He tells her about Tyler and Rex.*

*He tells her everything.*

*I stare at her, wanting to tell her how much I love her, how much I want her in my life, how much it has killed me to let her go when I wanted to hold on forever.*

*She pleads with him.*

*Isabel should never beg him for anything.*

*He doesn't deserve the breath she's wasting on him.*

*She looks at me and then at Max when Omar begins to stroke his son's bloody matted hair. Max makes a muffled sound and Omar smiles evilly at him. He welcomes Max back to reality when he picks up a plastic jug and dumps it over Isabel's head.*

*It's gasoline.*

*He plans to burn her.*

*He plans for Isabel to burn. Omar pulls a gun from his pants, carelessly waving it at me and Max. He asks her to choose and she tells him to fuck off.*

*How badly I want to kiss her right now.*

*Come on Rex.*

*There's a sudden BOOM and shattering noise. If I blinked I would have missed it. A bullet tears a hole into Omar's leg. He twirls and drops to the group. The gun is flung over by the cage and Isabel picks it up. Taylor runs to me and cuts me free and then Max. Omar digs into his pocket and throws a silver key to Taylor. It stops at my feet.*

*I grab it, unlocking the cage door.*

*Isabel isn't home anymore. Someone else takes over as she stalks Omar with the gun aimed to kill in her hands. Max screams for Isabel to stop, but I hold him back. I hold Max back so she can end this for all of us, especially Tyler.*

*Max's body goes limp when Isabel pulls the trigger.*

*She empties a full clip into him.*

*Isabel drops the gun and takes a step back.*

*Max and I drag his body out.*

*We all stand outside the barn. I ask Rex for a lighter. He tosses it to me and I flick it until a brilliant flame appears. I throw it into the thing that has threatened my happiness since the beginning.*

*I burn down the thing that wanted to end us all.*

\*\*\*

*Two weeks later*

*Isabel's engaged. I look down at the glittering ring that claims her finger. Max has a hold on her now. Then I glance at the three platinum rings on my thumb. Isabel has claimed me as well. I touch her hair and her face while she sleeps. Max is working extra late tonight. He shouldn't leave Isabel unprotected like this. Anything could just walk through the door...*

*"You left me," she whispers to me in her sleep.*

*"Should I be waiting for you?" I ask, staring down at the girl I will forever love.*

*She rolls over, leaning her face into my palm. "I've been waiting for you."*

*My thumb slides across her pink bottom lip. "I'll be waiting until I turn blue, Isabel. I'll wait for you."*

*"I've been hoping you wouldn't go," she says softly. "I have been waiting for you. I'll be waiting until I turn blue."*

*Gingerly pressing my forehead to her temple, I close my stinging eyes. "Forever, Isabel."*

*"Forever, Hunter," she whispers back.*

## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

### *The Winter Ball*

“You sure that’s the one you want?” a sales clerk asks me.

Her name is Mandy.

Bright brown-eyed Mandy.

“Positive,” I say, handing over my debit card.

“She’s a lucky girl,” Mandy says as she merrily wraps the gift I just bought Isabel. She scans my card, her optimistic expression growing wider with what seems to be wonder as her gaze runs down the length of me. It’s as if I restored her faith in romance again.

“You’ve got it wrong,” I reply, looking at the silk white bow on the gift bag. “I’m the lucky one.”

\*\*\*

Standing in the doorway, I gawk at Isabel. She takes my breath away with one glance. Three years ago she was a winter angel. Three years ago she was an ice princess in her wintery blues and majestic silvers. This year she’s a sun goddess. Her makeup is warm and light, accessorized with gold stencil designs that flare out on either side of her eyes. She has a roman leaf crown painted as a necklace on her collarbone along with gold

painted bangles above and below her elbow. A crown made out of ropes of sparkingly gold entwines in and out of her deep dark waves that cascade down her back. A flowy gown the color of champagne wraps around her beautifully. Her gown matches my suit tie. I'm dressed in all black and my hair is sleeked back into a knot at the nape of my neck.

“Ready?” she asks, turning to face me.

“Yeah,” I say, holding my arm out to her.

She looks up at me, her face soft and her eyes admiring. Isabel touches my face and smiles. “You’re beautiful, Hunter.”

“You’re prettier.”

She shakes her head, her thumb tracing the outline of my lips. “You don’t see yourself clearly. You are the definition of beauty, the epitome of beauty—” she places her hand on my chest, over my heart “—but your heart is the most beautiful part of who you are. I love you until the end of time. I love you until my very last breath, Hunter.”

Bringing her closer into me, I embrace her and soak in her warmth and love, never getting enough and always wanting more. “Isabel, you mean everything to me. You’ve been part of who I am for since the beginning of time. But you have something wrong. My heart isn’t the most beautiful part of who I am—you are. You’re so unbelievably beautiful and clueless about the rays of love you cast on everyone you touch, including me. I can’t love you enough, Isabel. I can’t give you enough, I can’t apologize enough. What I do for you will never be enough to ever forgive the things I’ve done.”

I hold her face in my hands, staring into glossed eyes and see blazing stars. “I’ve been cruel to you. I’ve craved to break you, yet you’re here with me. You have never given up on me, even when I wished you had. Baby, I love you until my last breath, until my heart stops beating and even then. My sweet, beautiful Isabel. How I love to love you. I was a hollow soul living off anger and fury. Pissed off at the world with resentment so bitter I tasted in my dreams. But you filled me with light, Isabel. You filled me completely, and now I’m bursting. I can’t ask for anything more.”

“Can we go to the ball now or are you going to talk me to death?” she asks breathlessly as I wipe her tears away.

“We can go to the ball, baby.”

\*\*\*

Twinkling lights are webbed intricately throughout the rows of leafy treetops. Giant velvet red bows are tied around the street lamps. The black asphalt streets are sleeked with fresh rain and lined with glossy luxury vehicles and ornamental horse carriages while men and women stroll around the festive square in their immaculate gowns and tuxedos. The town square looks like the cheery holiday of Christmas and smells of cedar and winter.

Grabbing Isabel’s hand, I give her a smile and guide her towards the red carpet where the photographers go berserk.

Smiling, I lean into her. “You’re making me so proud.”

She touches my cheek, grinning up at me. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I whisper in her ear as the flickering lights snap our pictures.

Isabel takes my proffered arm as I lead her to the ballroom. The ballroom is beautifully appointed with sparkling crystal chandeliers and a rich and creamy color palette that seems to be inspired by my golden princess at my side. We walk past welcoming faces and mountains of food and decadent wines to a huge linen table filled with loving smiles.

“You did this?” Isabel asks breathlessly.

Smiling at her, I nod. “For you.”

Before the ball began, I called everyone that Isabel cared about and asked them to be here to support Isabel for today. Everyone from Naya and Lark to Charlie and Blue and Ivy to Falcon and his family to Rex and Tyler and Isabel’s aunt and Max, Lily and their son to Candy and Caleb is here.

Apple in her pink strawberry-colored gown jumps out of her chair and runs up to Isabel, giving her a tight hug. “I’ve missed you. I’m glad you’re home.”

“I’ve miss you too,” she says, hugging her back. “How’s school?”

“College is a working progress,” Apple says as they hold each other at arm’s length.

Excusing myself, I leave the women to chat and join Rex and Naya at the table.

“How are things, baby sister?”

She shrugs but smiles. “Fine, I guess. Hero has been avoiding me. Have you talked to him?”

“No. I think he’s avoiding all of us. Or maybe he just lost his phone in Paris and decided to never replace it.”

“Is he okay?” Lark asks, genuinely concerned.

“I don’t know,” I answer. “But he will be.” I have all the faith in the world in Hero.

Naya shoves a frustrated hand through her dark locks, wrinkling her nose. “It’s weird that Hero wouldn’t call me back. He always calls me back. We always talk. But I haven’t heard from him in months.”

I squeeze her hand on top of the table. “He’s fine, Naya. I’ll make sure of it.” I’ll make a call to Patterson later about finding someone to track Hero in Paris. I’m sure he has a skilled person for every need.

Her small fingers curl around mine. “Get back to me as soon as you can, alright? I have to know Hero’s okay. I’m worried about him.”

Lark gives Naya a concerned glance. In his gaze I recognize both love and fear. He fears the extent and depth of her emotions for Hero and he loves her beyond the fear that echoes in the back of his thoughts. I have never questioned my little brother and sister’s relationship every time they hugged too long or looked too deeply into one another’s eyes. It’s apparent that they love each other, and I never question love. What kind of relationship they have is their business, not anyone else’s.

“Boy,” Charlie bellows, playfully gripping the back of my neck. Charlie and Caleb stand at my side, Charlie



has a goblet in his hand and Caleb seems sober. “The holidays are always a lovely time of year.”

“Have you had one too many already, Grandpa?”

He laughs, deep and infectious. “You know your old man well. I have my family here, my grandbabies are having babies of their own and that’s cause enough for a celebration.”

Caleb smiles at me. My father has a kind smile, but it still utterly baffles me. I never received many smiles from him when I was younger. In fact, he made sure we never saw him at all. He was absent most of my life. I haven’t tackled my feelings about this. Confronting Caleb is a challenge I have yet to conquer. But fatherhood is ever-present for me. I should at least talk to this man.

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Hunter?” Caleb asks, beating me to it.

“Yeah,” I say, glancing at Isabel. She’s talking to Harmony, Candy, Apple and Ivy about something. They’re all hanging on her every word.

Caleb and I amble over to a more intimate sitting area off to the side where we settle into deep brown leather Victorian-styled wingback armchairs. We are surrounded by scented white long-stemmed orchards and roses that spurt out of large transparent glass vases. An image of Isabel in her tulle white dress with her daisy crown braided on top of her dark waves as she walks down the aisle to meet me at the altar fills my vision. I smile inwardly. We had orchards and roses at our wedding so many years ago.

The view of the dance floor is great view and I can clearly see Isabel from this distance. I don't want to be too far from her tonight.

"Hunter," Caleb says, drawing my attention back to him.

My eyes are fixed on his blue ones and I secretly cringe because it's like looking into the mirror at the future Hunter Knight, which could be good or bad...or bad and good. My father isn't an evil man. He is simply a man of mistakes. Those mistakes are fewer since he stopped drinking. "Yes?"

"I am sorry... for everything," he enunciates each word clearly. "You have been the star of my life, Hunter. I've loved you since the day you were born. Though, it may seem otherwise. I am not perfect and I will not make excuses for my behavior. I can only pray for your forgiveness, son."

Something lightens inside of me while something dark simultaneously sheds from me. I can feel myself evolving into the person I'm meant to be. "I forgive you."

Tears brim his golden lashes, causing his eyes to become translucent like the color of the purest ocean. "I love you, Hunter."

"Love you, too, Dad," I say, testing it on my tongue. It's been years since I called him Dad. But it feels right.

His smile quivers as he wipes at his leaking eyes. Something is beginning with him rather than ending. Caleb is my father and I am my father's son. Our future is optimistic because I see him a part of it.

"My boys," Charlie interjects, wrapping an arm around Caleb's shoulders. It seems like they've made up

as well. “I’m happy to see this before I’m gone. Now where the hell is my problematic grandson, Hero?”

“To be young and in Paris,” Caleb says, his expression thoughtful.

“I’m sure we’ll hear from him soon,” I reply, staring at Isabel as she slow dances with Max. A pang of jealousy surges through me. Has she forgotten? Max doesn’t get to touch her.

Breathing deeply, I shake off the madness. There’s no need to be irrational... well at least for tonight.

“Hey,” Taylor greets coming up to me. “You wanna dance?”

“Sure.” I rise to my feet, taking her outreached hand in mine.

We make our way to the dance floor. Taylor braces her palms on my shoulders and my arms rest lightly on her waist as we sway to the gentle melody. Rex’s intent gaze doesn’t go unseen. He watches us closely from the table while he converses with Lily and little Max.

“You’re doing a great job,” she says quietly.

“Thanks. It means a lot coming from you. How’s life been?”

“I love being around my mom. She’s incredible. She has so much love to give and I’ve been soaking it up like sponge. Rex is amazing. He’s understanding and patient with me when I become defensive and bitchy.”

“Why do you become defensive and bitchy?”

Her eyebrows snap together, her lips curling as if she tastes something bitter. “Your brother.”

“What did he do? Hero hasn’t been himself since Tyler died, but then he spent time with you and he resembled his old self again until you guys ended.”

Her deep hazel eyes dim, her expression somber. “There are relationships that form how you perceive everything. There are relationships that make the vital part of who someone is. There are relationships that can devastate someone. Your brother was all of that for me.” She looks up, her hands clutching my shoulders hard.

My fingers dig into her waist and that’s the only thing that keeps me from flinching from the pure agony I see. “I didn’t have much of anything, Hunter. The only thing of value I had was Hero. He was the sun that blessed me with unbelievable warmth so soothing it calmed the soul. You have no idea how tightly I held on to him, afraid he would disappear and leave me to face the wintery cold alone again. My sun was beautifully unstable. But Hero burned so bright, blazing like nothing I’ve ever seen. He was like a fading star shooting across the blackened sky, coloring everything with electric joy. He was my home. Hero was all that I knew. But my sun imploded.” A few tears roll down her cheeks. “In life, you encounter people, relationships and situations that take a toll on you. I could never be home for a star as powerful as the sun.”

“Taylor,” I say, holding her tight. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ll take it from here,” Rex says, stepping in.

Nodding, I pass her to Rex. She presses close to him, burying her face in his chest. Taylor is right. I have no idea what they went through or why Hero would break someone as sweet as Taylor. I have a feeling that Hero’s story is a novel in itself.

Isabel is standing by a platter of fruit when I reach her. “Dance with me?”

“Okay,” she says, smiling at me.

“I love when you smile at me,” I say, spinning her in tiny circles.

She giggles into my shoulder when I pull her back. Her laughter is melodic and soft, the things lullabies are made of. This is the sound of happiness. The dance floor clears gradually. Everyone piles on the sides to watch me and Isabel together.

I spin her around and around just to hear her erupt in laughter. Only when she’s breathless do I pause and lower to on bended knee. She gasps, squeezing my hand in hers. “Isabel, I promised you forever, and that’s what I’m giving you. Will you be my wife?”

She stares down at me for brief eternity, her expression inscrutable.

This may be the part where she finally realizes that I’m not good enough for her. The poisonous words Sally spat three years ago repeat in the back of my mind.

*He is clearly too erratically unstable to do much of anything.*

*He would probably kill us all in the end, anyway.*

Isabel’s warm palm on my cheek pulls me from my terrifying reverie. “Yes. I’m yours, Hunter.”

Releasing the pent-up air in my chest, I rummage in my pocket and pull out the black case that holds three thin delicate bands made of white gold and encrusted with flawless diamonds. “My three little angels,” I whisper, sliding the rings above her engagement ring.

The cheering and whistling fades as I stand and kiss Isabel.

Yeah.

I can love this girl forever.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

### *Repercussions*

Isabel is giggling and giddy when I carry her up the spiral staircase. I embrace the weight of all my possessions I own in this world, holding Isabel tighter to me. She nuzzles her face in my neck, sighing. “The babies are kicking. They’ve been dancing all night.”

“Are you tired?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

I lay her in our bed and begin to undress her, switching her gown for a pair of my boxer shorts and a T-shirt. She doesn’t move when I wipe off all traces of her makeup with a washcloth until her face is clean.

We are tangled limbs and sheets as we cuddle in the bed. It’s as if I ran a marathon today. I’m exhausted. It’s a struggle to keep my eyelids open. I glance down at Isabel and witness her staring at her twinkling rings, her face bathed in the silver light of the moon.

“Did you have a good time?” I ask through a yawn, rubbing her back in small circles.

“I did. Thank you.” She kisses my jaw, her fingers tracing my mouth. “You make my life full too, Hunter. I’m bursting with happiness.”

“Baby,” I whisper into her hair, breathing in the scent of sweet berries.

“Have you thought about names?”

“I haven’t. Have you?”

“I have,” she murmurs.

“Let’s hear it.”

There’s a moment of hesitation and then she smiles. “Emerald for the boy and Sapphire for the girl. What do you think?”

Two spectacular images form in my mind’s eye. One is a beautiful baby boy with blonde curls and big green eyes. The other is a baby girl with chubby rosy cheeks and black tresses and striking sky-blue eyes. I’m gone for them already. “They’re the precious gemstones of our life,” I say, assuring her. “I love their names.”

“So glad you fell in love with me,” she says, hiding massive under my chin.

“Me, too,” I reply, concealing my grin in her nest of silky hair.

We fall asleep smiling and holding each other in utter bliss.

Isabel is all I have dreamt about.

It’s unreal when dreams come true.

But I’ve earned this.

\*\*\*

The presence of something dark threatens to smother me in my nightmare. My body jolts forward and I gasp for breath. I’m bathed in sweat and my entire body is trembling. Slowing my breathing, I glance at Isabel who sleeps peacefully beside me. My heart rate

returns to normal as I breathe deeply, my eyes still on Isabel.

The nightmare is nothing more than a fleeting sense of terror. But that terror is amplified when I notice a slender shadow at the foot of the bed. Narrowing my eyes, I squint into the darkness and realize two eyes the color of onyx staring back at me.

“Sally?” I rasp, unsure and a little disoriented.

She steps out of the shadow with a gun in her hand. She has the deadly weapon aimed at Isabel and it’s as if she already shot me. “You have everything, Hunter, even the devotion and love of your pretty captive. You have no idea how I’ve envied you.” Her gleaming white teeth sink into her bottom lip as she struggles with her tears. Her attractive face is twisted with bitter hatred. “How I wish I could have children. You cursed me, Hunter. I will never be a mother. But you know that, don’t you?”

“Sally, stop. Look at yourself. You were free of me. You can move on with Chance. You have so many options. Why would you sacrifice happiness for me? What the hell are you doing?”

“Chance left me,” she says, the first tear spilling from her right eye. “He’s gone and he’s never coming back.”

“Sally, listen—”

“No, Hunter. You listen,” she half mutters and half yells. I glance at Isabel in fear she wakes, but thank God she doesn’t. “I hate you. I hate you with everything I have inside of me. Hate is just as strong as love. Hate is just as passionate as love. Hate is just as volatile as love, and I fucking hate you, Hunter Knight. Nothing would make me happier than killing your beloved Isabel, to



watch her blood slowly soak the white sheets of your bed you fucked her in until it's completely red." Her finger eases back on the trigger. A wave of helplessness washes over me, robbing my lungs of oxygen. "This is your repercussions, Hunter. You get to watch the love of your life die."

"Don't," I whisper, my mouth dry. "Kill me."

She tilts her head to the side, her expression thoughtful. "Romantic down to the very end. For that, I'll grant your request in taking your life instead of hers." She doesn't give me time to pull the sheet off when she pulls the trigger, shooting me in the gut. A burst of intense pain spreads throughout my midriff. She shoots me again in my chest area. I don't feel this shoot because I'm going numb fast.

Isabel screams.

Sally fires another shot on herself.

Isabel's teary face hovers above mine.

I'm wrapped in a blanked of ice cold numbness.

"I love you, Hunter," Isabel says through her sobs as she rocks.

I try my hardest to smile.

I don't know if I do because I can't feel my face.

She loves me.

I float in and out of consciousness until blackness takes over.

This is the end.

## CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

*This is Forever*

Four months later...

Incredible warmth touches my side and my chest. My limbs move with ease when I reach up and caress Isabel's long hair. A clock close by ticks away the seconds. Something wet drips at an even pace. And the smell of antiseptic causes me to wrinkle my nose.

Where are we?

My eyes open to a blurry unfamiliar white hospital room that's covered with flowers and balloons and cards.

Clear tubes and tape run along my nostrils and are twisted like ivy on my hand, crawling up my arm. I'm propped with Isabel in the hospital bed with me. She's asleep with a sleeping baby that has thick ringlets of golden hair on my chest and another baby with black waves cradled on Isabel's side.

*Emerald and Sapphire.*

My eyes shut for a brief moment.

I'm alive.

Elation and gratitude bubbles inside of me.

I made it.

I'm here.

Petrified of missing anything else, I blink my eyes open. They look bigger than newborns.

They're a few months old.  
My heart thuds painfully.  
I've missed their birth.  
Sally took that away from me.  
That was my punishment.

My body fills with fiery heat that threatens to split me open but when I look at Isabel and she stares back at me with those hazel-green eyes a calming peace settles over me. This is my forever.

"Hey," she greets quietly as if not to wake the babies, smiling her brilliant smile.

"Hey," I say, grinning back.

## THE FINAL PAGE

*Six Years Later*

“Daddy, can we add more chocolate chips?” Sapphire asks, her big blue eyes wide and excited.

“Yeah,” I say, watching my daughter sprinkle chocolate chips over the rim of the porcelain plate. Her head is bending in concentration, her deep black locks dangling over her shoulders.

“Daddy, can I add syrup?” Emerald questions with the bottle of maple already clutched in his small hands, his smoky green eyes lit with mischief.

Ruffling his soft blonde curls, I nod. “Sure. Go ahead.”

He squirts syrup over the thick stack of golden chocolate chip pancakes. Then they look at each other with matching impish smiles and flour-powdered faces and begin to lay chocolate chips and maple syrup on thick. They have me down to a science. My children understand that I can never deny them of anything. They are covered in batter and have wrecked the kitchen with good intentions on helping me make chocolate chip pancakes for Isabel.

I look to the ceiling and shake my head. God, I love my children. They take my breath away every day. I am

lucky to be living my dream. I get reminded of that every day.

“Ready to give Mommy breakfast in bed?”

They both nod.

Sapphire runs to cling to my leg and Emerald sprints to settle on foot. They both hitch a ride on me. I lift the tray from the sticky countertop and begin to make my way to our bedroom.

My kids own me and they are very aware of this.

Nudging open the door with the tip of my elbow, I watch them race to Isabel with their small arms flailing wildly and their hair blowing in the air as they run. I love the way my children greet us. My kids greet us every day like they haven’t seen us in years.

Isabel is asleep after a long shift at the hospital. She loves working. I think it gives her a good release to help people that she can’t get solely from me. I also think she works too much, but I’m not going to mention it unless she gives me cause to.

“Morning busy bumble bees,” Isabel says as she tickles them into oblivion.

“Morning, Mommy,” they both greet in unison.

“Daddy let us make pancakes.”

“We added lots of chocolate chips and syrup.”

Isabel’s gentle eyes travel over to me and I fall in love all over again. “Good Morning, Daddy.”

“Good morning, Mommy,” I say through a massive smile, making my way to my family.

My life is beyond enough.

I have my three little angels.



## EPILOGUE

*Hunter age nine  
Isabel age eight*

*My heart is beating as fast as fluttering bird wings. I stare down at my shiny white dress shoes with Isabel in thought.*

*“Feet don’t fail me now,” I say to myself as I take steady steps through the white aisle. With each step I take, I get closer and closer to the flowery alter, the fragrant scent of orchards and roses wafting throughout the air.*

*I take in our small crowd of faces. Hero smiles at me and laughs as he says something to Tyler. Tyler is leaning his head on Hero’s shoulder as he visually sighs into him. Tyler wipes at his leaking eyes with the sleeves of his white shirt and Hero curls an arm around his back and grins down at him. My eyes shift to Isabel’s mom*

*who is dressed in a pale yellow dress that looks like morning sunrise on her. She smiles at me and her gaze translates she has all the faith in the world in me and Isabel.*

*She believes in us.*

*Caleb grins at me, gripping a bible tightly in his hands. I grin back, never imagining my father as the ordained minister solemnizing our wedding ceremony. He loves me. I know this. But it's still so strange to see him here, dressed in a white a holy robe after all the sinful things I've witnessed him do.*

*Taking a deep breath, I shake it off and enjoy it, enjoy everyone that's here, enjoy my wedding day that I will never forget.*

*I'm marrying my best friend today. Not many people are that lucky. Not many people are that fortunate. But I am.*

*The golden sun breaks through the thinning clouds, beaming through the canopy of green treetops as if God himself is blessing us. Isabel and her father begin to walk down the snow white aisle, the soft melody of piano keys floating with every step they take from a small radio nearby. I don't recognize the gentle lullaby.*

*But it's beautiful.*

*My wide eyes land on Isabel in her ivory dress and my stomach trips over itself. I have butterflies. I've never had butterflies before. This is all strange, so beautifully strange. She really does look like a princess with the rays of golden warmth shining on her. The daisy crown sits perfectly on top of her dark flowing hair that's waving down her back.*



*The pounding in my chest grows faster when she smiles shyly at me. Water hits my eyes when her father places her hand in mine. He's giving Isabel to me and the serious look of happiness and sadness tells me how important she is to him, how I can't mess this up, how we're meant to be together.*

*She's mine to protect.*

*She's mine to love.*

*She's mine to cherish.*

*My father opens his bible, but before he begins to read, I lean in close to place my lips at Isabel's ear.*

*She has to know something before we're married.*

*Something I've been waiting to tell her since I saw her.*

*Something that will never change.*

*"You and me, Isabel. Forever."*

*I lean back to capture her face.*

*She nods in agreement, staring deep into my eyes and her bright smile widens. "Forever, Hunter."*

*I close my eyes and bow my head, smiling because I know she means it.*

*Forever.*

## Letters to Isabel

*Dear Isabel,*

*I want to start off by saying that I'm a very proud father. You and your brother make me unbelievably proud, baby girl. I have no doubt that you will be the star of the universe. I have so much faith in you, Isabel. I don't want you to blame yourself for my actions. You'll have enough on your plate. I want you to know that I'll be looking down on you, even from where I am. I love you, Isabel. I love you infinitely, honey. Daddy loves you so much. Remember that when you get sad.*

*My dearest Isabel,*

*You are my little moon-pie. You will forever be my little moon-pie. I love you, sweet pea. Be sure of that fact. Give my grandbabies many kisses for me and give Tyler a big hug for me. Mommy loves you.*

**THE END OF BOOK TWO**

## *Sneak peek of Pure Clarity (Web of Deception #3)*

*There's a life that still hangs in the delicate balance of where they should be and falling into complete destruction.*

*Hero Knight drinks alone on top of Cherry Cliff, the glass bottle still warm in his tightly clamped hands.*

*Angry hot tears roll down his cheeks as he yells at the walloping wind.*

*I sit beside him in the damp grass, wanting to hold this hurting boy in my arms, wanting to comfort my best friend, wanting to soothe him.*

*He shouts violent words to no one, but I hear them all. Gritting his teeth, he shakes with fury and frustration when he screams out my name.*

*"Tyler," he yells.*

*"I hope you're fucking happy."*

*"I hope you're fucking watching."*

*He wipes at the current of tears on his face with the sleeve of his jacket. "You fucking left me. I'm nothing now without you."*

*You'll always be my hero, Hero, I whisper to him.*

*He cries harder, losing the battle with his tears.*

*You have to stop this, Hero.*

*You have to be stronger.*

*You have to wake up, Hero.*

*He drowns his sorrows in a bottle of Jack as he  
holds my teddy bear to his chest.*

*Hero will get better.*

*Hero has never broken a promise before.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Dreaming of You in Paris*

*Taylor and I sit high on Cherry Cliff, lying on top of a thick black quilt. The neck of the Jack bottle hangs loose from my slack grip. I'm not faded exactly. I have a nice buzz going. Taylor is good company. She never talks about herself. She never whines. She always listens to everything I have to say, even if it's a bunch of mumbling bullshit.*

*I love this fucking girl.*

*Her fingers find mine, plucking the bottle free. She sets it by her side and interlocks our fingers. My gaze drops down to our entwined hands, a sudden calm taking over me. Taylor makes me feel like a winner, even though I'm a fucking disaster, a fucking loser with a capital L.*

*"Do you believe he wanted us together?" she asks, her shimmering eyes aimed at the glittering stars in the dark blue velvet sky.*

*"I do, in a way, believe Tyler wanted us together. He wouldn't mind that much as long as you took very good care of me." I give her a teasing smile and she touches my cheek. Taylor and I have grown close since Rex's birthday party.*

*We are ever hardly apart.  
It's like she's part of me now.*

*"Hero, I really want you to be my first," she  
declares softly.*

*The heat of my blush creeps up my neck. It seems  
Taylor is the only one that can make me blush these  
days. "Okay."*

*Her expression is momentarily stunned, her mouth  
hanging wide-open and her eyes bugging out. "That's  
it? Okay?"*

*"I'm not going to ask you if you're sure so you can  
change your mind," I say, hurriedly unbuttoning my  
jeans. "I'm going to destroy your virginity up here with  
the twinkling stars as our background and I'm not going  
to stop till you come at least twice. I can show you how  
good coming feels." I nod my head, sure of myself.  
"Yeah, you're going to fucking love this."*

I wake with a sudden jolt. I've been having this  
same fucking dream for the past six months. I took  
Taylor's virginity over three years ago, but she still  
haunts me. She haunts me every fucking night. I don't  
have a clue at what this means. Taylor avoids me with  
eager persistence. She never returns my calls or emails  
and she definitely doesn't want to meet in person. I  
haven't spoken to her in years.

But it's all my fault.  
I fucked her over.  
I destroyed her trust.  
I shattered her trust in me.  
And I'm the one to blame.

Closing my eyes, I try to slow my erratic heart rate. The massive hangover has my head jumping, like my brain is having a rave party. I have a show later tonight and I'm still drunk and high.

Fucking Paris.

\*\*\*

McDonald's. Out of all the five star dining restaurants in Paris I choose McDonald's. I am what the French call a *Stupide Américain*. Two weeks in Paris and I'm already homesick. Eating at a McDonald's is the closest thing to American food in France. Everything else is too decadent and rich in flavor. This does nothing for my taste buds when my cuisine usually involves Doritos dipped in ranch dressing. I'm used to eating junk and Paris has less of it, which is a pity because I'm going through one hell of a detoxification process and not only of sugar and carbohydrates.

Tossing a few fries around on my tray, I glance up. There is a vociferous group of loud fuckers around my age and they're harassing someone who appears to be an outcast of sorts. I'll call him Curly because this dude has a head full of thick, dark curls. They're all model-looking and even dress in designer attire like models. These guys must be from another agency. I've never seen them before. They are all too visually striking to be regular Joes.

The blonde leader dumps Curly's milkshake on his tray and the rest of them stick their hands in the splattered milkshake, laughing while licking the dripping stickiness from their fingers. Curly simply wraps his gray cashmere scarf around his neck with casual indifference that makes me grin and he then rises to order something else.

Fries.

He orders fries.

But Blondie gets up and snatches his fries from his hands and dumps them on the poor guy's head. The small crowd erupts in uncontrollable laughter. Blondie smirks at him and thumps his nose. Curly grins, puckering his lips while making a series of kissing noises. This upsets Blondie and he grabs the guy by his coat labels.

Before I can't comprehend any further, I slam Blondie into the wall and press the side of my forearm into his throat, crushing his windpipes. He struggles to breathe and his green-blue eyes expand. Blondie is terrified. His hands involuntarily reach up and grip and claw at my arm, beckoning for release.

Staring into his eyes, I watch them water while I enjoy the sight of him experiencing the delicate balance of his life in my hands. How easy it is to crush this guy. His eyes grow larger with every inch I move closer. I'm so close to him. Our noses are touching. A wide smile takes over my face and I free him. He wraps his hands around his reddened throat and wheezes, coughing. The guys behind us do nothing.

My eyes land on the victim of all this mockery. Curly holds my gaze steady for a mere second or so and,



this is the first time I really notice his face. God, he's beautiful in such an angelic way. He has graceful arches, elegant angles, and apparently a face and body carved from a sculptor's chisel. His hazel-brown eyes communicate gratitude without him verbalizing anything.

He's beautiful.

Whoa.

Wait.

I don't think I've ever admitted another guy was beautiful before, well, except Tyler. Tyler was beyond beautiful. But never have I felt such attraction towards another male after or before Tyler. I thought I was just attracted to Tyler because he was... Tyler.

He blinks at me, his dark lashes fluttering like raven wings and then he walks past me and the now quieted group without speaking. Only when he leaves out the doors do I break out of this weird trance.

*Why does it feel like I've been sucker punched in the stomach?*

I follow him without looking back. Curly leans his back against the building with a cigarette pressed hard between his quivering lips and a red lighter in his hands. But his trembling fingers fail to set the ignition.

Placing my hands around his, I ignite the flame on the lighter and hold his shaky limbs steady as I guide the flame towards his mouth to light his cigarette.

He inhales and I release his hands. Curly stares at me with enigmatic eyes. This feels like it goes on forever but in actuality it's probably a little less the five seconds. His eyes transform into a curious dark brown as they

travel the length of my body. Curly glances at my shoes and smiles. "Nice boots."

He's American.

Too captivated by whatever is happening, I don't respond.

He sighs dramatically and pinches the burning cherry off his cigarette with his fingers without even the merest of winces. "I shouldn't be smoking. Ice. She's going to kick my ass when she smells it on me." He swiftly moves the cigarette between his fingers at an impressive speed. I've seen magicians do that trick with quarters. Curly looks down at the cancer stick he effortlessly weaves through his knuckles and his smile broadens. "You want to know something?" He doesn't give time to reply. "I can take a shower and wash my clothes before Ice ever finds out." He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep inhale, leaning his head on the brick wall behind him. "But I'm not. I need a good beating. It's been awhile, you know?" Curly opens his eyes. The only thing I can do is hold his inquisitive gaze.

Who is this man-boy?

He's inscrutable.

And who is this Ice girl?

Curly carefully places the used cigarette back within a carton full of them in such a precise manner, as if the carton of smokes might detonate and then slips the packet back in his jean pocket. He pushes himself off the brick wall and steps towards me. Only when we're face-to-face do I notice the assortment of cinnamon-colored freckles scattered on his face. They're tiny and mainly below his hazel-brown eyes and sprinkled across the bridge of his nose and cheeks.

They look edible enough to lick.

His brows furrow as he studies my face.

“You probably didn’t understand a word I’ve said, which I’m thankful for, honestly. What are you? You don’t look French. Swedish? You look Swedish or maybe Danish. But not French. You’re too pale to be French. You’re tall, and your eyes are scary beautiful. They’re the fiercest shade of blue I’ve ever seen.” He leans in close to study the color of my eyes. “Glacial blue.” His sweet breath whispers across my skin and under the scent of tobacco vanilla is present. He was drinking a vanilla milkshake before the assholes dumped it out on his tray. He nervously chews at his pulp bottom lip as his eyes narrow in on mine.

I wonder what’s going through his head right now.

“Well, anyway, merci. I’m glad you helped me out back there. Russia is a dickhead, you know? Well I guess you don’t.” He laughs at what he says. A strange emotion surges through me. His laughter affects me more than his unfathomable gaze.

This guy has triggered something in me that was long forgotten. What the hell is going on with me?

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

A black, sleek Mercedes van pulls up by the curb. “Benjamin comes to collect the damned to bring us back to the House of Horrors.” He stomps the toe of his leather riding boot against the sidewalk.

A thin dark-skinned man, flamboyantly dressed in an all black ensemble sashays towards us. He wears round-shaped sunglasses that are also black. His frilly

shirt is over packed with dainty ruffles. His pants are skin-tight and made of some kind of shiny material that resembles glittery latex and he wears very high heels. This costume is something that Lady Gaga would wear. “You’ve found one, Alex.” This man isn’t American. I think he’s English.

“Benjamin—”

“He’s perfect. Absolute perfection,” Benjamin murmurs, stepping directly between us. He looks up at me in utter awe while slipping off his black laced gloves. His slender fingers covetously clutch my chin, turning my face at different angles as if making sure I am worth the value of his praise.

He’s appraising me.

Why though?

“Lady J will be delighted to have him, Alex. Where on earth did you discover exquisite beauty of his caliber?”

Pulling my face away, I scowl at him. Benjamin’s brown eyes bulge. I don’t think he’s used to rejection. Alex chortles and I note that he has dimples in both cheeks. They indent his cheeks deep when she smiles.

He’s cute.

My heart flutters a little.

“My, my, my, he has a temper.” Benjamin raises his sunglasses, pushing them behind his ears. He beams at me. “Perfect.”

“You’re miss informed, Ben. He’s not a new trophy to obtain and to be added to the collection. He’s my friend.”

“You have no friends, Alex,” Benjamin says, never taking his eyes from mine. He says it without the slightest hint of irony or amusement. I find this strange.

*Why wouldn't a kind guy like Alex have friends?*

“Such a pity. He would be an excellent addition to our ‘collection’ as you so call it.” Benjamin sighs dramatically, dismissively patting Alex on his cheek. “Go on and tell him goodbye. Lady J would be outraged if she was aware of your error of judgment, which she will not be because I’m too fond of our outings and I will be devastated if we no longer had them. We’re only in Paris until Friday.” He gives me a small smile before entering McDonald’s.

“Well, um...” Red tings his cheeks and he stomps the tiptoe of his boot against the sidewalk again. Is he blushing because of me? He holds his hand out and I shake it. “This is goodbye. Thanks again for saving me back there. You didn’t have to do that. Again, you probably have no idea what I’m saying.” Staring down at his hand in mine, I notice that his hand is a little smaller and his skin is a rich olive brown color. On a playful impulse, my thumb runs across the skin of his wrist.

He tenses, his breath caught in his throat.

Alex shakes his hand free and leisurely throws on his hood, giving me an enigmatic look. I wink at him and his sculpted lips break out into a brilliant smile before he gets in the van.

Benjamin struts back out with the same group of sulking guys behind him. He digs in his shirt pocket and hands me a thick black textured soft as cream card with elegant gold embossed numbers across it. It has a number boldly printed on the front and nothing else.

“Please call if you change your mind,” he says, patting my cheek in the same fond but dismissive manner he patted Alex cheek with.

I watch as the sleek van quietly disappears from the curb.

My eyes drop back down to the expensive card in my hand and I smile.

I think I’m going to enjoy my stay in Paris after all.

For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Hero Knight and I’m a liar with a story to tell.

Wait until you read my side of things.

**Pure Clarity (Web of Deception #3)  
Coming Soon**

## **Thank you note & About Author**

Thank you so very much for purchasing and reading my novel. If you like what you have read please leave me a rating on Amazon.com and tell a friend or two.

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I'm an independent author with an eclectic taste in all things, especially writing. I was born and raised in North Carolina. I've been writing for four years now and I've been self-published since 2013. Writing fills me with joy and wonder. I'm extremely passionate about my craft, achieving to be better at it as I continue to work. As a writer I promise to give you the best of what I do. My job is to entertain you, and I take my job seriously. I invite you to share my journey with me. But buckle up because this is going to be one hell of a ride.

Other Books by Michelle Watson:

Pure Illusion (Web of Deception #1)  
Forgetting How to Breathe

*Dare to dream a dream and pursue.*

Until next time, my friends